

Managers' autonomy, strategic control, organizational politics and strategic planning effectiveness: An empirical investigation into missing links in the hotel sector

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Strategic control is a powerful antidote for the practice of organization politics.
- A high level of managers' autonomy leads to more organizational politics.
- Organizational politics negatively influence strategic planning effectiveness.
- Strategic control and managers' autonomy can vary independently.
- Strategic planning practices within the hospitality and tourism industries.

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the impact of managerial autonomy and strategic control on organizational politics and show how the latter influence effectiveness of strategic planning. In doing so, it outlines particular directions that a rebalanced strategic management research agenda may take. Whereas organizational politics have received sustained interest in the management literature, its conceptual and empirical examination in the tourism industry has been meagre. This study contributes to fill this gap by analyzing data from 175 four- and five-star hotels located in a less researched region, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The findings indicate that high levels of autonomy combined with low levels of control negate the effectiveness of strategic planning by increasing organizational tensions. Drawing on political and organizational perspectives, an interpretation of the results and policy implications are discussed. The study also delineates interesting research avenues for further research on organizational politics in the tourism industry.

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1. Introduction

A broad range of studies have conceptualized organizations as political coalitions of members with often divergent goals; and they have also attested to both the ubiquity of organizational politics and to their widespread destructive impact on organizational outcomes (Elbanna, 2010; Kacmar & Baron, 1999; Kreutzer, Walter, & Cardinal, 2014). However, with few and less related exceptions (e.g., Buonocore, 2010; Hung, Yeh, & Shih, 2012), there has been very little theoretical and empirical research on organizational politics in the hotel sector, despite its importance and its treatment for decades in the management literature. The research reported in

this article aims to help to fill this gap by examining the impact of two antecedents of organizational politics (managers' autonomy and strategic control), and one of its outcomes (the effectiveness of strategic planning).

It has been widely argued in the literature that organizational factors are influential in predicting political behavior (Shrivastava & Grant, 1985). When managers, for instance, allocate resources, they are affected by how much autonomy they have and what level of control they are subject to. This notion has received support from several authors who show that organizational factors exert more significant effects on political behavior than do other environmental and manager-related factors (e.g., Elbanna & Child, 2007; Papadakis, Lioukas, & Chambers, 1998). Given the above, this article proposes a framework to help managers understand how two important organizational factors, which are less researched in

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the literature of political behavior, influence organizational politics. These are autonomy and control. Although autonomy gives managers greater flexibility to act, at the same time, strategic control provides means for tighter top-management control over their actions (Fig. 1).

Autonomy describes the independence and authority given to managers or teams within organizations to develop new thoughts or proposals and carry them through to completion (Hughes & Morgan, 2007). As argued by Drafke and Kossen (2002), autonomy indicates the freedom of an individual to perform tasks and control work. It represents a decentralized decision structure or an organizational context where executives can act without prior approval from top management and sometimes even without their awareness (Andersen & Nielsen, 2009; Mintzberg, 1994). In other words, it captures the extent to which middle managers can act and decide without top management approval. Some researchers have found that there is no direct relationship between middle managers' autonomy and firm performance. However, they report that such autonomy indirectly affects organizational performance or planning effectiveness through other organizational variables, such as capabilities (e.g., Ouakouak, Ouedraogo, & Mbengue, 2014) and adaptive behavior (Andersen & Nielsen, 2009). Although middle managers' autonomy has been emphasized in the literature for quite some time, very little is known about its role in organizational politics and thus an aim of this article is to establish how far autonomy may contribute to organizational politics.

The strategic management literature clearly advocates the importance of strategic controls system to monitor strategic progress and ensure the execution of strategic plans (Goold & Quinn, 1990). The inherent uncertainty and novelty of strategic planning processes expand the likelihood that strategic planning will face attempts of political influence by organizational actors (Ferris, Fedor, Chachere, & Pandy, 1989). Strategic control addresses the central strategic problem of an organization seeking to align the activities and performance of managers with its strategic objectives (cf., Sitkin, Cardinal, & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2010) and therefore it provides the basis for decisions on actions to correct deviations from strategic objectives (Goold & Quinn, 1990). We regard strategic control as a process in which organizations use strategic objectives as standards, measure the performance of their strategic plans, compare this performance to standards, and feed information back about undesirable variances in order to take relevant corrective actions. Although there is a broad consensus that strategic control or monitoring is one of the key activities of strategic management (Nixon & Burns, 2012), it is a less researched area in organizations (Berry, Coad, Harris, Otley, & Stringer, 2009) and the emphasis on this activity is less than on other activities, such as formulating strategic plans (Elbanna, 2013). This gap between the

strategy process and strategic control has been the subject of recurring criticism (Marginson, 2002). For example, there has been comparatively little empirical research to explore whether and how strategic control influences organizational politics. This, in itself, exemplifies a gap in the strategic management literature. Moreover, the research that has been carried out either addresses other types of control, such as organizational controls (e.g., Kreutzer et al., 2014) or examines different aspects of politics in the hotel sector, e.g., political skills (e.g., Hung et al., 2012). Research like ours is, therefore, required in order to understand the role of strategic control in confining political activities which in turn influence the attainment of organizational objectives.

Further, we speculate on the extent to which the empirical setting influences the results of prior research concerning organizational politics; that is, how generalizable to the hotel sector are the findings about organizational politics from other industries, which can provide managerial insights into ways of improving the effectiveness of strategic planning. Deriving quantitative relationships about the effect of these factors across a wide spectrum of hotels would enhance the awareness of the determining factors and outcomes of organizational politics in the hotel sector. To the best of our knowledge, almost no research has been done in this sector into the relationships that are examined in this study although the hotel sector is a key industry in many economies (Fraj, Matute, & Melero, 2015) including these of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Alpen Capital, 2014).

This sector is highly sensitive to business, political and economic conditions and its growth can have a strong influence on performance of hotel companies (Chen, 2010) which in turn influences the dynamics of organizational politics (Elbanna, Thanos, & Papadakis, 2014). The outlook for the GCC hospitality industry is positive with an increasing demand and consequently capacity expansion supported by strategic initiatives of the regional governments such as upcoming mega events in Qatar (e.g., the world cup 2022) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (e.g., the Expo 2020) (Alpen Capital, 2014). Therefore, the setting of the GCC hotel sector is particularly relevant to test our research hypotheses given the high dynamics of hotels' strategies in the region nowadays and consequently the potential role of organizational politics accompanying such dynamics.

In conclusion, our research objective is to answer two pressing research questions in the literature of strategic management in general and that of the hotel sector in particular. These are (1) how far do managers' autonomy and strategic control influence organizational politics? (2) What is the effect of organizational politics on the effectiveness of strategic planning? As concluded by the most recent review of studies on strategic planning in the hospitality and tourism context (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014), this study

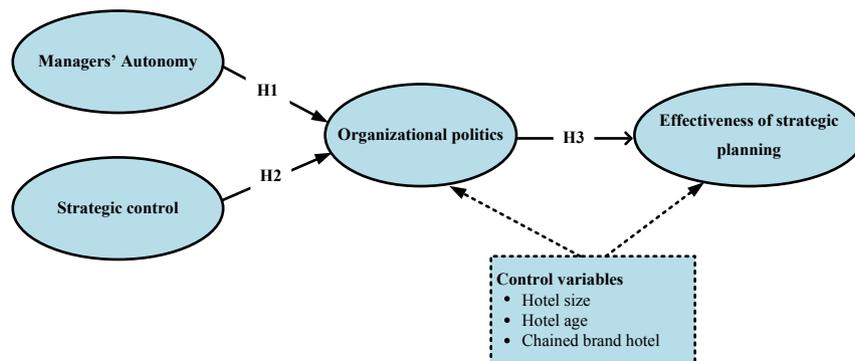


Fig. 1. Managers' autonomy, strategic control, organizational politics and strategic planning effectiveness.

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection

Data for this study are from a survey of hotels in two GCC countries, namely, the UAE and Qatar. Sampling was limited to four- and five-star hotels; only hotels that had strategic plans were included in this study as an attempt to make sure that the hotels in the sample frame had at least some form of strategic planning process. After eliminating hotels with less than four-star status from the initial sampling population, the overall sample was reduced from 939 to 312 hotels. From the targeted 312 hotels, 190 hotels responded (an initial response rate of 61%). 15 surveys were dropped due to insufficient data, irrelevant respondents and the low ranking of the respondent hotels. The final sample consisted of 175 hotels, which represents a response rate of 56%. Data were collected in 2014 and the survey lasted approximately four months. In data collection, the four biggest cities in the UAE and Qatar were targeted. These are Dubai, Doha, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah (data collected from 80, 42, 32 and 21 hotels respectively). Our sample and respondents are described in [Table 1](#).

The questionnaire was developed and administered in English since it is the first language in hotels in both the UAE and Qatar (cf., [Elbanna, 2012](#)). In order to ensure content validity, the targeted respondents were managers who (1) were familiar with strategic planning practices in their hotels, and (2) had worked in their hotels for one year at least. The average number of years which the respondents had spent in the sampled hotels was 6 years. Based on two criteria, specifically, prior experience in conducting similar research projects and a recommendation from other scholars, a professional market research company was used to collect data. The research team was trained before going into the field. Data were gathered through individual data collection interviews using a fully standardized questionnaire (with answers on a five-point scale).

3.2. Measures of constructs

Existing multi-item scales that have exhibited strong measurement properties in research addressing strategic planning were used for all the constructs associated with managers' autonomy, strategic control, organizational politics, and planning effectiveness. [Table 2](#) describes the measures.

Managers' autonomy was evaluated using three items adopted from [Andersen and Nielsen \(2009\)](#). Each respondent was asked to assess managers' autonomy below the top management team, on a

five-point Likert type scale with “definitely false” at the low end (1) and “definitely true” at the high end (5). Following [Titus, McDougall, and Slevin \(2010\)](#), strategic control was measured on three items using a five-point Likert type scale (1, “not at all”; 5, “to a very great extent”). Because of its symbolic and often hidden nature, prior work taking a perceptual approach to measure organizational politics was followed (e.g., [Ferris & Kacmar, 1992](#); [Kreutzer et al., 2014](#)). The scale of organizational politics was adopted from [Harris and Ogbonna \(2006\)](#) which was originally adapted from work by [Piercy \(1987\)](#). In using this scale, the respondents were provided with the following definition of organizational politics, “intentional actions of influence taken by people to enhance their own interests.” Then we asked them to consider this definition and place their hotels on one of five points on the scale (from 1, “not political at all” to 5, “highly political”). Given that an effective strategy process can lead to different planning benefits beyond the traditional financial dimensions of performance ([Gerbing, Hamilton, & Freeman, 1994](#)), strategic planning effectiveness was assessed using six items derived from prior research ([Bryson, 2004](#); [Elbanna, 2013](#); [Poister & Streib, 2005](#)). Respondents were asked to indicate how far the strategic planning processes in their hotels generated either harmful or beneficial impacts in relation to these items (1, “very harmful”; 5, “very beneficial”) which reflect three lines of potential benefits from strategic planning in the sampling organizations, namely, strategic direction, fit with the environment, and organizational performance.

In addition to the above four variables, three control variables were incorporated in the study: hotel size, hotel age, and membership of a chain of hotels. Considering the possible impact of hotel size ([Avci et al., 2011](#); [Hughes & Morgan, 2007](#)) and hotel age ([Elbanna, 2012](#); [Fraj et al., 2015](#); [Hughes & Morgan, 2007](#); [Ju & Zhao, 2009](#)) on autonomy, organizational politics, strategic processes, and organizational outcomes, both size and age were incorporated in the study as control variables. Hotel size was objectively measured by the number of full time employees, and hotel age was quantitatively measured as the number of years since the sampled branch of the hotel had first been established. To consider the possible impact of being part of a hotel chain or an independent hotel on strategic processes and outcomes ([O'Neill & Carlback, 2011](#)), we controlled for the impact of this variable by using a dummy variable to distinguish between an independent hotel (coded 0) and a chained-brand hotel (coded 1). In recent years, the topic of “brand versus independent hotels” has become increasingly popular. Chain hotels, for example, may tend to embrace formal and long-term strategic planning whereas independent hotels may imply short-term and informal strategic planning.

The survey instrument containing all the above-mentioned scales was pretested with a group of hotel executives and another group of academics. According to the feedback received, some items underwent refinement in order to improve their clarity and readability. The preliminary assessment of the measures indicated a high degree of content validity and internal consistency as discussed below in the section on data analysis and results.

In response to the research design, informants could have provided data consistent with their beliefs about the way in which managers' autonomy and strategic control should link to organizational politics and how the latter related to strategic planning performance; thus, common method variance is a potential source of measurement error. Furthermore, retrospective accounts of past facts are supposed to be more accurate than accounts of beliefs and perceptions, which are more subjective and vulnerable to the effects of cognitive bias and faulty memory ([Golden, 1992](#)). In light of related research ([Elbanna, 2012](#); [Miller, 2008](#); [Slater & Atuahene-Gima, 2004](#); [Thomas & Ambrosini, 2015](#)), [Table 3](#) shows the

Table 1
Profiles of sample and respondents.

Sample	Respondents
Size, age and localization	Job titles
Average number of employees: 213	Sales/marketing managers: 30%
Average age of hotels: 10 years	HR managers: 16%
% of local employees: 5%	General managers: 14%
% of expatriate employees: 95%	Financial managers: 9%
Hotel ownership	Duty managers: 9%
Private sector: 144 hotels (82%)	Front office managers: 8%
Publicly held: nine hotels (5%)	Assistant hotel managers: 4%
Joint venture: 22 hotels (13%)	Others, e.g., operations, regional, IT: 10%
Hotel ranking	Gender
Four stars: 95 hotels (54%)	Male: 81%
Five stars: 80 hotels (46%)	Female: 19%
Hotels chain	Education
Chained-brand hotel:	University degree: 88 respondents (50%)
143 hotels (82%)	Graduate degree: 73 respondents (42%)
Independent hotel:	Not provided: 14 respondents (8%)
32 hotels (18%)	

Table 2
Measurement scale proprieties.

Constructs and indicators	Standardized loading	Indicator reliability	Error variance
Managers' autonomy (Cronbach alpha = 0.74; CR = 0.74; AVE = 0.59)			
Managers below the top management team can market to new customer segments without approval	0.66	0.44	0.56
Managers below the top management team need no approval to initiate new service development	0.79	0.62	0.38
Managers below the top management team can introduce new practices without approval	0.65	0.42	0.58
Strategic control (Cronbach alpha = 0.77; CR = 0.78; AVE = 0.63)			
Our hotel keeps close track of how well our strategic plan is being carried out	0.75	0.56	0.44
Our hotel regularly conducts performance reviews to determine whether we are likely to achieve the objectives of our strategic plan	0.84	0.71	0.29
Our hotel takes corrective actions based on reported performance measures	0.61	0.37	0.63
Organizational politics (Cronbach alpha = 0.94; CR = 0.94; AVE = 0.75)			
Allocating resources	0.74	0.54	0.46
Making decisions	0.84	0.70	0.30
Hiring and firing employees	0.86	0.74	0.26
Rewarding people/departments	0.94	0.89	0.11
Overall	0.94	0.89	0.11
Strategic planning effectiveness (Cronbach alpha = 0.85; CR = 0.85; AVE = 0.49)			
Developing a clear vision for the hotel	0.71	0.50	0.50
Orienting the hotel toward a unified mission	0.82	0.67	0.33
Defining clear priorities and focusing on the important issues.	0.67	0.44	0.56
Achieving a good fit between the external environment and the internal capabilities of our hotel	0.78	0.61	0.39
Delivering high-quality services	0.59	0.35	0.65
Improving hotel performance	0.61	0.38	0.62

measures we took to mitigate common method variance, memory failure and distortion problems.

4. Data analysis and results

Table 4 demonstrates descriptive statistics and does not suggest multicollinearity problems since all correlation coefficients are comfortably lower than 0.50. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to code and analyze the data employing the two-stage modeling process (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). In this process, we first test a confirmatory measurement model in order to assess the adequacy of the individual items and the composites by measures of reliability, validity and the model's goodness-of-fit. Next, SEM was used to test the structural model. To test how well the data fit the measurement and structural models, the traditional goodness-of-fit indices were used, specifically, the incremental fit index (IFI), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and the comparative fit index (CFI). Values of the above fit indices range from zero to 1.00 with a value close to 1.00 indicating a good fit (Byrne, 2010). Other fit indices were also selected to assess the fit of the models. These are the chi-square (X^2), root square mean of approximation (RMSEA) and associated confidence interval, PCLOSE (testing the null hypothesis that RMSEA is no greater than 0.05), and standardized root mean

square residual (SRMR) (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The rest of this section is organized as follows. In Section 4.1, we run exploratory factor analysis and test the full measurement model. Section 4.2 presents the results of structural model and hypotheses testing.

4.1. Measurement model

As recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1982), an exploratory factor analysis was run before testing the full measurement model. All items loaded highly on their intended constructs (item loadings range between 0.66 and 0.89). Next, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the resulting scales and verify the validity and unidimensionality of the study measures. Details on the properties of the measures are provided in Table 2.

Construct validity was examined using convergent validity along with discriminant validity. Convergent validity refers to the degree to which the indicators of a specific construct that theoretically should be related are in fact related. It can be assessed by three criteria. These are factor loadings, construct reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009). First, adequate convergent validity for the items was established because all loadings of items on

Table 3
Measures taken to limit research design potential shortcomings.

Potential source of error	Measures taken to alleviate issue
Common method variance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A priori consideration of method's effects was demonstrated through locating the variables included in this study in different places in the larger project, and thus attention was not drawn to our key relationships. • Objective data were used to measure three variables: hotel size, hotel age and chained-brand hotels. • Reliability and validity evidence for the scales used was provided. • Harman's one-factor test of common method bias was performed and shows that the first factor explained less than 30% of the variance in the data. Hence, a substantial amount of common method variance does not appear to be present.
Memory failure and distortion problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents were asked to describe exactly what happened in their respective hotels, not what should have happened. • Hotels which did not have strategic plans were excluded. • Data were collected from managers who got closely involved in the strategic planning process. • Respondents' participation in this study was strictly voluntary • It fostered a sense that participating hotels will get benefits from the study. • Respondents were assured that responses were anonymous and confidential. • As discussed above, the position and tenure of respondents were used to ensure that competent informants completed the survey instrument.

the limitations of this study in mind, they still can offer fruitful opportunities for future research. The limitations are, first, that the data were collected from a single region (i.e. the GCC). Although this was intentional, some caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings of this study to other national settings. A cross-cultural study would resolve this issue. Second, this study reports from each firm the views of a single respondent. It could be said that another executive might have provided different responses and taking the average of their responses could have led to results that were more robust. However, the nature of our data (drawn from the answers to a long questionnaire referring to several variables) and the characteristics of the sample (only a very few people per hotel are in position to complete the questionnaire) made it extremely difficult to draw on the perceptions of more than one respondent per hotel. In such cases, relying on only one respondent per hotel appears to be a viable and reliable research choice. Indeed, the study keeps in line with several previous studies on organizational politics (e.g., [Walter, Kellermanns, & Lechner, 2012](#)). Third, our research design is cross-sectional (measuring dependent and independent variables at the same point in time). This raises issues as to whether there is a causal relationship between the examined variables. Hence, real-time studies would offer additional insights regarding the antecedents and outcomes of organizational politics.

Fourth, the few variables incorporated in this study may not reveal the real complexity of the problem under analysis and therefore they may be integrated into more integrative models of organizational politics including psychological, sociological, and situational variables in order to capture the level of complexity and variety of the relationships under investigation (see for example, [Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997](#)). Fifth, although certain measures were taken to increase the accuracy of the respondents' responses, as discussed above, there is still the potential for social desirability biases in the responses.

Sixth, the AVE of strategic planning effectiveness (0.49) is slightly below the acceptable limit of 0.50 and the RMSEA of the measurement model (0.03) is below the acceptable limit of 0.05. Considering the fact that the above deviations are minor, this study covers an under-researched topic and the results in [Table 5](#) indicate the good fit of both measurement and structural models by most indices, we trust that these slight deviations do not seriously affect the study results and our measures still enjoy a satisfactory degree of both reliability and validity. Seventh, scale anchors were not reversed in any place in the study survey which should be considered by future research in order to check the accuracy of respondents' answers and reduce the common method bias.

Our theorizing and findings on strategic control, autonomy, politics and planning performance also have important implications for future research. First, citing [Kober, Ng, and Paul \(2007\)](#), future research can examine the interrelationship between mechanisms of strategic control system and strategy content/processes. The traditional view is that the strategic control system is shaped by strategy. More recent viewpoints, however, suggest that there may be a two-way relationship between the two variables. That is, strategic control influences on, and is affected by, strategy process. Such relationships need a retrospective longitudinal study, spanning several years and involving different data collection methods, e.g., archival data, interviews, observations and questionnaires. Second, recent reviews and empirical research of the field have suggested the conceptualization of organizational politics be reconsidered to reflect their constructive aspects, offering yet another avenue for future research ([Gavetti, Greve, Levinthal, & Ocasio, 2012](#); [Kapoutsis et al., 2014](#); [Kreutzer et al., 2014](#)). In this view, organizational politics are not necessarily negative as it was argued in this article, but can play constructive roles in organizations ([Kapoutsis et al., 2014](#)). Third, future research needs to

consider what kinds of control it addresses, e.g., organizational, management, strategic, accounting, behavior or outcome controls ([Malmi & Brown, 2008](#)). This can help to understand how controls combine and complement each other and their applicability to different contexts ([Kreutzer et al., 2014](#)). Fourth, two general views on politics are presented in this article – the autonomy view and the control view. The debate on autonomy and control may center on two issues: first, on the question of whether these two are substitutes or independent; and second on their links with organizational politics. Our framework examines the latter only and hence the debate between the independent or substitutional nature of autonomy and control, and the ideal balance of these views can be a subject of future research. Scholars, for example, can explore theories about the optimal balance between control and trust (e.g., [Della Corte & Aria, 2014](#); [de Man & Roijakkers, 2009](#)).

To conclude our study, the analysis confirms that organizational politics are expected to be rarer in low autonomous and high control situations and that organizational politics have detrimental effects on effectiveness of strategic planning. The above results represent key issues not yet well understood in the theoretical literature of organizational politics, in the hospitality and tourism industry in particular, which can provide managerial and theoretical insights into ways of improving performance of hotel companies. Further, our discussion concerning autonomy and control highlights the paradox at the core of strategic management thinking regarding their competitive demands and outcomes which needs further attention from future research.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.06.025>.

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