

Antecedents and Outcomes of Employee Engagement in the Hospitality Sector: A Non-western Study

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Abstract: Both academics and practitioners increasingly emphasize employee engagement as a means to generate higher levels of job performance and organizational success. While the employee engagement literature is well established not much is known about employee engagement in the Arab region and engagement of the expatriate's workforce living in these countries is non-existent despite their importance and disproportionate number compared to the local population. This paper focused on the antecedents of employee engagement of expats residing in Kuwait. It examined the relationship between employee engagement, service climate, co-worker support, and psychological capital. On the second level of analysis, we assessed the relationship between employee engagement and organizational citizenship behavior, employee engagement and quit intention. We also examined the extent to which job satisfaction is impacted by OCB. Results are based on 536 cases. Two software statistical packages (SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 24.0) are used for the analyses. The SEM results revealed that service climate, co-worker support, and psychological capital were positively related to employee engagement. Furthermore, we found that employee engagement has a positive relationship with OCB. However, employee engagement does not have any significant relationship with quit intention. Finally, the results showed that OCB is negatively associated with quit intention. Seven hypotheses were tested and subsequent managerial implications are provided. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings provide detailed and novel insights.

Keywords: Employee engagement, quit intention, employee satisfaction, hospitality sector, non-western context

1. Introduction

In today's rapid changing economy and dynamic business environment, organizations are facing a highly competitive business situation. Organizations are challenged with new technologies, rapid innovation, economic uncertainties, fierce competition, high employee turnover, as well as demanding consumers whose preferences and expectations are continuously changing (Holston-Okoe, 2017). These challenges demand the attention of managers to remain competitive (Sharma and Prasad, 2018). An important aspect of organizations that has a great influence on organizational performance and which has attracted the attention of both academics and practitioners is employee engagement (Agarwal, 2014).

Many tourism and hospitality companies of all sizes are finding increasingly difficult to recruit and retain employees. For example, recent findings from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics show that the leisure and hospitality sectors have some of the highest turnover rates of any industry. In 2017, leisure and hospitality recorded a turnover of 11.852 million jobs (or 73.8% annual total separations rates of the industry), of which 1.905 million (representing 82.0% annual separation rate) were attributed to the Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and 9.946 (or 72.5% annual total separation rate) were recorded for accommodation and food services related jobs. Employment turnover is measured by adding the sum of quits, layoffs and discharges, and other separations. Interestingly, annual total separations rates of the industry was 7.936 million (annual quits rate = 49.4%), of which 781 thousand were for Arts (annual quits rate = 33.6%), entertainment, and recreation, and 7.155 million for accommodation and food services sectors (annual quits rate = 52.1%). The annual quits rates are the highest in the turnover category compared to layoffs and discharge rates. The accommodation and food services rates are about four times higher than the layoffs and discharges rates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018).

Retaining employees is a critical management issue (Walsh & Taylor, 2007), and engaging them is even more challenging (Kang, 2014). Employee engagement is associated with a positive, affective-motivational, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, fulfillment, absorption, and dedication (Rothbard, 2001).

Expatriates constitute 49% of the total population of the Gulf States. The number of expatriate workers residing in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states is significantly higher compared to the local population. Saudi Arabia hosted the largest number of expatriates with a record of over 10 million, followed by the UAE and Kuwait. In

the UAE, expatriates made up 88.5% of the total population. Expatriates constitute 89.9% of the total population of Qatar and 69.4% of that of Kuwait (National Institutes of Statistics, 2016) (Table 1). These numbers are composed of several different types of expatriates who, as employees, play different roles in their host countries.

This study examines the antecedents of employee engagement with a focus on expatriates from three work-related constructs: organizational level (service climate), group level (co-worker support), and individual level (psychological capital). Whereas service climate and psychological capital have been widely tested in research about the antecedents of employee engagement, co-worker support remains under-represented. The inclusion of co-worker support in this study emerged initially out of interviews conducted with 15 expatriates working in the hospitality sector. Our interviews paved the way for this quantitative paper.

The purpose of this paper was to empirically examine the antecedents of employee engagement in the hospitality sector (e.g., hotels, restaurants, coffee shops, airlines/airports) with Kuwait as a case study to shed light on engagement of expatriates in a context where the expatriate population overwhelmingly outnumbers the local population. The expatriate workforce of Kuwait constitutes about 70% of the total national population (Table 1). Kuwait was a convenient choice as the authors reside in Kuwait. The objective of the study was to develop and test a theoretical model that explains the interrelationships among seven constructs identified in the literature -psychological capital, service climate, co-worker support, organizational citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction, turnover intention, and to explore the mediating effects of expat employees' work engagement.

Results of this study were based on 536 questionnaires completed by expatriates working in the hospitality sector in Kuwait. It is our hope that the study findings would stimulate further research on employee engagement in this part of the world and with the expatriate workforce as a focus. Research focused on expatriate employees residing in an Oil-rich Arab context would not only make a theoretical contribution, but also provide management in hospitality with an understanding of the effects of engagement and of the practical tools that can stimulate employee engagement in this particular work context and living environment.

2. Literature review

2.1 Employee engagement

Employee engagement can be defined as "the level of commitment, enthusiasm, and involvement an employee has towards his work which can be deliberately seen in his/ her loyalty towards the work" (Sharma and Singh, 2018). Hewitt and Associates (2004) linked employee engagement with employee commitment to the success of the organization, their passion for their work, and energy in the workplace. They argued, engaged employees "stay, say, and strive-stay with and are committed to the organization, say positive things about their workplace, and strive to go above and beyond to deliver extraordinary work".

Gubman (2004) argued that employee engagement goes beyond employee satisfaction and performance. He links employee engagement to an intensified emotional state that leads to organizational loyalty and organization citizenship behavior.

Engaged employees within an organization provide a competitive advantage to organizations because of their performance, positive word-of-mouth (Joo and Mclean, 2006), willing to align themselves with organizations' strategies, mission, and values (Soni and Mehta, 2018), trust in and commitment to the organization (Baumruk, 2004).

There is also empirical evidence for the relationship between employee engagement and employee wellbeing (Hansen, Byrne & Kiersch, 2014). Marlatt (2002) supported that employee engagement reduces despair, anxiety, and enhances psychological wellbeing, whereas disengaged employees are likely to witness increased psychological distress.

2.2 Antecedents of employee engagement

The antecedents of employee engagement have attracted the attention of academics and researchers in the past few years. Finding out and understanding the factors that enhance employee engagement can lead to employee and management synergy. Many factors were found to contribute to employee engagement. For

example, Gangai and Agrawal (2017) examined the relationship between perceived leadership styles and employee engagement and found that the two have a highly significant relationship. Their results also supported that transformational leadership had a stronger relationship with employee engagement than transactional leadership. Goswami and Goswami and Goswani (2017) also showed empirical evidence that trust in the leader has a positive influence on employee engagement. Jain and Ansari (2018) examined the role of perceived organizational politics on employee engagement and concluded that perceived negative organizational politics negatively affects work and organizational engagement. Goswami and Goswami's (2017) research supports the hypothesis that workplace inclusion is positively related to employee engagement. Boon et al. (2011) identified four Human Resources Management practices namely, teamwork, empowerment, reward, and communication. Several studies have also indicated the relationship between CSR and employee engagement (Soni and Mehtan, 2018).

According to Vazirani (2007) important drivers that make the employee engaged include, career development, leadership, empowerment, pay and benefits, health and safety, communication, and job satisfaction. Bhalera (2013) reported that workplace culture, work-life balance, policies and practices are major drivers of employee engagement. Saks (2006) and Balain and Sparrow (2009) indicated that perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, and organizational justice are important antecedents of employee engagement. According to Ram and Prabhaka (2011), employee engagement is affected by job characteristics, intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, perceived supervisor support, perceptions of procedural justice, and perceptions of distributive justice. Kaur (2017) found that the most identified antecedents in the literature across countries and industries are organizational communication, organizational culture, rewards, remuneration and recognition, employee development, job satisfaction, fair feedback and benefits/compensation, mentoring, work life balance, relationships with peers, workplace relationships, job characteristics, career development, organizational commitment, HRM practices, transformational leadership, and personality traits, etc.

A systematic literature review of employee engagement, its definitions, antecedents, and outcomes undertaken by Kaur (2017) indicated that employee engagement is multi-faceted, dependent on the country (e.g., Canada, Iran, India, Jordan, Yemen, Uganda, Malaysia, Pakistan, Slovenia, South Africa, Ghana, Kenya), and on the industry under investigation (e.g., retail, education, banking, telecommunication, hotels, service, hospitals, government, insurance, airlines).

Kaur (2017)'s extensive literature review, which considered empirical research published between 1971-2016, clearly suggests that the antecedents of employee engagement are contextual. This leads to the conclusion that managers need to be cautious when using, interpreting, and applying the results of other studies to their respective company. The study "highlights country-wise variation between antecedents and employee engagement (...) and showcases that every work setting has a different approach to drive engagement among employees" (Kaur, 2017). Similarly, Nienaber, Martins, Randburg' (2016) edited book "Employee Engagement in a South African Context" as the title suggests clearly argued that employee engagement can be better understood when it is country and industry specific.

2.3 Employee engagement in hospitality

Only a handful of studies focused on employee engagement in hospitality (Kang, 2014) representing a handful of countries, the majority of which is US-based. Kang's study "represents one of the first to develop and test a comprehensive model of employee engagement based on positive organizational behavior" (p. iii). Based on a sample of frontline hospitality employees in Norway, Slatten and Mehmetoglu (2011) concluded that employee engagement is closely linked to the employee's innovative behavior at work, and that "perception of role benefit, job autonomy, and strategic attention were all significantly related to greater employee engagement".

Focusing on frontline hotel employees and their managers in Romania, Karatepe (2013) proposed and tested a research model that investigates whether work engagement functions as a mediator of the effects of high-performance work practices on job performance and extra-role customer service, and found that work engagement acts as a full mediator of the effects of HPWPs on job performance and extra-role customer service. He supported that HPWPs –i.e., training, empowerment, and rewards- predict work engagement. The purpose of Kang's (2014) doctoral study was to develop and test a theoretical model that explains the interrelationships among six constructs -psychological capital, service climate, work engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, employee satisfaction, and turnover intention, and to explore the mediating effects of employee engagement.

Kang (2014) found positive and statistically significant correlations between psychological capital and employee engagement, and between service climate and employee engagement. Employee satisfaction was positively correlated with employee satisfaction, which in turn negatively affect employee turnover. Results of a study about frontline staff in five-star hotels in Seol, Korea, conducted by Paek et al. (2015), suggested that work engagement partially mediates the effect of employee psychological capital on job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment. The authors concluded that frontline employees with high psychological capital are more engaged with their work and more likely to display job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment (Paek et al, 2014). Huertas-Valdiva, Llorens-Montes, and Ruiz-Moreno's (2017) study based on a Spanish sample concluded that both empowering leadership and psychological empowerment mediate the engagement of employees working in hospitality in Spain. A study in the US by Kang and Busser (2018) support that psychological capital and service climate positively mediate employee engagement, and concluded that the two antecedents were more important to engage managers than frontline employees.

3. Methods

3.1 Data collection and sample

The data for this study was collected during the month of March 2018 from employees working at various service companies in Kuwait. The access to the target employees was facilitated by the MBA students who were working in those companies. The questionnaire was distributed to participants by the MBA students along with a letter explaining the purpose of the study and the structure of the survey. Participation was voluntary, and the respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Respondents were asked to rate the degree of agreement on each statement of the survey, from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

A total of 693 surveys were distributed and 536 complete surveys were received and used for the data analysis, representing a response rate of 77.34%.

3.2 Measurement

All constructs in this research were operationalized using reliable and valid scales previously established in previous research.

Service Climate. We measured this variable with six items developed by He et al., (2010). It includes items such as: "My organization has clear ideas about customers and their needs", "High quality service is emphasized as the best way to keep customers coming back to my organization".

Psychological Capital. We used a four-item scale adapted from Paek et al., (2015) to measure the construct of psychological capital. Due to a poor loading, one item from the four-item scale was removed from the analysis. Example of items: "I always look on the bright side of things regarding my job".

Co-worker support. Co-worker support was evaluated with a scale of five items developed by Hon (2013) such as: "coworkers help each other out if someone falls behind in his/her work".

Employee Engagement. The scale used to measure employee engagement was a four-item measure adapted from Schaufeli et al., (2002) such as: "I feel energized at work".

Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB). To measure OCB, we used a four-item scale adapted from a scale developed by Lee and Allen (2002) such as: "I defend the organization when other employees criticize it".

Job Satisfaction. We measured this construct using Tsui et al.'s (1992) five-item measure such as: "I am satisfied the nature of the work I perform".

Quit intention. To measure quit intention, we used a measure of three items developed by Konovsky and Cropanzano (1991) such as: "I frequently think about quitting my job at this organization".

Control variables. We controlled our results by including four control variables namely, ethnicity, education level, seniority, and rank.

4. Analysis and results

We used a two-stage methodology to analyze the collected data. In the first stage, we assessed the reliability and validity of the constructs used in this research. In the second stage, we tested the causal relationships using the structural equation modeling (SEM). Two software packages (SPSS 25.0 and AMOS 24.0) were used to analyze the data.

4.1 Measurement model assessment

We assessed in this sub-section the reliability and validity of the various scales we used in this research. To check the scales reliability, we first ran a principal components analysis with Varimax rotation and extracted six factors. The six factors explain together 68.354% of the total variance. All item loadings were greater than 0.60, supporting uni-dimensionality (i.e., degree to which items load significantly on their respective constructs), with the exception of PsyCap 2, PsyCap 3, and JS2. We kept these three items in our analysis due to their significant loadings.

We also checked constructs' reliability using two other indexes: Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR). All values of the two indexes exceeded the recommended value of 0.7. Thus, the constructs are considered sufficiently reliable.

4.1.1 Validity.

We checked the two types of validity: convergent validity and discriminant validity. To assess the convergent validity, we used two statistical indexes AVE and KMO. For both values greater than or equal to 0.50 are considered as satisfactory (Lucian et al., 2008). All the AVE and KMO indexes are superior to the minimum value of 0.50 (See Table 2). Therefore, the conditions for convergent validity are fulfilled of all the variables used in our research.

To evaluate the discriminant validity - the degree to which measures of any two variables are empirically distinct, we used a model fit comparison approach. We run and compare between two confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) models, the first one is a constrained model with all factor correlations fixed at 1.0, and the second one is an unconstrained model. The CFA unconstrained model revealed significantly better model fit (CFI = 0.902, χ^2/df = 3.615, TLI = 0.888, NFI = 0.869, and RMSEA = 0.070) than the CFA constrained model (CFI = 0.837, χ^2/df = 5.106, TLI = 0.825, NFI = 0.806, and RMSEA = 0.088). Thus, the constructs were discriminant of one another.

4.2 Structural model assessment

4.2.1 Descriptive statistics and correlations.

Table 1 details the descriptive statistics and correlations among the independent and dependent variables. As shown, the three independent variables (Climate service, psychological capital, and co-worker support) are positively correlated with employee engagement ($r = 0.589, p < 0.01$; $r = 0.624, p < 0.01$, $0.643, p < 0.01$, respectively). In addition, employee engagement is positively correlated with OCB and job satisfaction ($r = 0.633, p < 0.01$, $0.666, p < 0.01$, respectively) and negatively with quitting intention ($r = -0.263, p < 0.01$). Lastly, job satisfaction is positively correlated with OCB ($r = 0.600, p < 0.01$) and negatively with quitting intention ($r = -0.242, p < 0.01$)

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations

N	Construct	Means	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Service climate	3.946	.781	1	.518**	.670**	.589**	.576**	.498**	-.217**
2	Co-worker support	3.905	.816		1	.626**	.624**	.501**	.582**	-.227**
3	Psychological capital	3.890	.846			1	.643**	.577**	.559**	-.219**
4	Employee engagement	3.984	.810				1	.633**	.666**	-.263**
5	OCB	3.906	.801					1	.600**	-.249**
6	Job satisfaction	3.774	.770						1	-.242**
7	Quitting intention	2.973	1.109							1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.2.2 Hypothesis testing

The different hypotheses derived from the conceptual model were tested using the SEM technique in AMOS 24.0. To assess the model fit, we used the following statistical indices: the comparative fit index (CFI), χ^2 /degrees of freedom (df), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), normed fit index (NFI), and root mean square of approximation (RMSEA) (e.g. Hair et al., 1998).

We run one single model in AMOS that examines the direct relationships. The model estimation produced the following statistical index values: CFI = 0.925, χ^2 /df = 2.570, TLI = 0.915, NFI = 0.883, and RMSEA = 0.054, indicating a good model fit with the data (Gefen et al. 2000; Hair et al. 2006). The results of the structural relationships are depicted in Figure 1. The coefficients are standardized and the values in brackets are the T of Student.

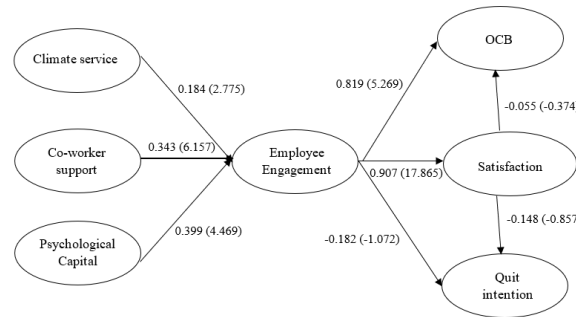


Figure 1: Estimated research model

As depicted in Figure 1, climate service has a positive and significant relationship with employee engagement ($\beta = 0.184$, $T = 2.775$, $p = 0.006$)¹. Thus, H1 is accepted. As we predicted, co-worker support relates positively and significantly to employee engagement ($\beta = 0.343$, $T = 6.157$, $p = 0.000$) leading to accept H2. Also, psychological capital has a positive and significant relationship with employee engagement ($\beta = 0.399$, $T = 4.469$, $p = 0.000$), in support of H3. As suggested in H4, employee engagement relates positively and significantly to OCB ($\beta = 0.819$, $T = 5.269$, $p = 0.000$). Also, we found that employee engagement has a positive and significant effect on job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.907$, $T = 17.865$, $p = 0.000$), in support of H 5. However, employee engagement does not have any impact on quit intention ($\beta = -0.182$, $T = -1.072$, $p = 0.284$), so we reject H6. Finally, inconsistent with our expectations, job satisfaction does not have any significant impact on either OCB nor on quit intention ($\beta = -0.055$, $T = -0.374$, $p = 0.708$; $\beta = -0.148$, $T = -0.857$, $p = 0.392$; respectively), rejecting H7 and H8.

We also examined the potential effects of four control variables (Ethnicity, seniority, education level, and rank). The results are depicted in Table 3. We found that ethnicity, seniority, and rank have significant controlling effects on employee engagement ($\beta = -0.063$, $T = -2.002$, $p = 0.045$; $\beta = 0.098$, $T = 3.077$, $p = 0.002$; $\beta = 0.132$, $T = 4.134$, $p = 0.000$; respectively). Furthermore, education level exerts significant controlling effects on both OCB and quit intention ($\beta = 0.172$, $T = 4.588$, $p = 0.000$; $\beta = -0.101$, $T = -2.302$, $p = 0.021$; respectively). However, all other controlling effects were not significant.

Table 2: Results of the controlling effects

Path specified	Path Coefficient β	t-Value	p-Value
Ethnicity – Employee engagement	-0.063	-2.002	0.045
Ethnicity – OCB	0.068	1.822	0.068
Ethnicity – Job satisfaction	0.060	1.761	0.078
Ethnicity – Quit intention	-0.020	-0.453	0.651
Seniority – Employee engagement	0.098	3.077	0.002
Seniority – OCB	-0.035	-0.937	0.349
Seniority – Job satisfaction	-0.049	-1.450	0.147
Seniority – Quit intention	0.053	1.196	0.232
Education level – Employee engagement	-0.030	-0.950	0.342

¹ Here, β is the regression coefficient, T indicates the t-value (A relationship is significant if the t-value is greater than 1.96) and P indicates the p-value.

Path specified	Path Coefficient β	t-Value	p-Value
Education level – OCB	0.172	4.588	0.000
Education level – Job satisfaction	0.016	0.475	0.635
Education level – Quit intention	-0.101	-2.302	0.021
Rank – Employee engagement	0.132	4.134	0.000
Rank – OCB	0.038	1.051	0.293
Rank – Job satisfaction	0.017	0.503	0.615
Rank – Quit intention	0.050	1.132	0.258

5. Discussion (In progress)

5.1 Main findings

Despite the acclaimed importance of employee engagement to the success of an organization, only a few empirical studies examined the antecedents of employee engagement in hospitality (Saks, 2006; Kim et al., 2009; Kang and Busser, 2018). Employee engagement in an Arab context is non-existent. Employee engagement with a focus on the expatriate workforce is also not represented in the general literature. This paper tried to fill these three gaps by focusing on the engagement of expats working in hospitality in a GCC country wherein the number of expats is three times bigger than that of the national population. Furthermore, because the drivers of employee engagement are country, industry, and organization-specific, it becomes important for managers to continuously monitor the engagement of their workforce (Slatten and Mehmetoglu, 2011).

In this study, we examined the effect that service climate, co-worker support, and employee psychological capital have on employee engagement, and also the effect that employee engagement has on OCB and intention to quit. Whereas service climate, co-worker support, and psychological capital were positively and statistically correlated with employee engagement, no relationship was found between quit intention and employee engagement and OCB and employee engagement. These results support the importance of for organizations to have a good service climate, to encourage co-worker support, and to enhance the psychological capital of their employees. On the other hand, the fact that neither quit intention nor OCB is directly linked to employee engagement but is moderated by employee satisfaction in that higher job satisfaction decreases employee intention to quit is a very important finding.

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