THE DRIVERS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AMONG KNOWLEDGE WORKERS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION IN CHINA WITH THE MODERATOR OF CURIOSITY: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

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Abstract

Employee engagement is a key factor for an organization's success and competitive advantage. The engagement level of knowledge workers in tertiary education determines the efficiency and quality of tertiary education, as well as the healthy and sustainable development of tertiary education. However, China's overall employee engagement level is very low, and specific to the knowledge workers in the field of tertiary education is also not optimistic. And the low engagement will lead to many problems, such as poor performance, health complaints (burnout, depressive symptoms, sleep disturbances), stress and strains, and intention to quit This study examines the factors that influence and shape employee engagement of the knowledge workers in the context of tertiary education in China. It does this by studying multilevel factors at three levels, the individual, organizational and external levels. The present study will investigate the influence of the organizational culture, perceived supervisory support, and new ways of working on employee engagement among knowledge workers in the tertiary education area in China. And also investigate whether curiosity moderates the relationship between organizational culture, perceived supervisory support, and new ways of working to the employee engagement among knowledge workers in tertiary education in China. A questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents while Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the study hypotheses.

Keywords

Employee Engagement, Organizational Culture, Perceived Supervisory Support, New Ways of Working, Curiosity

Introduction

Employee engagement is a key factor for an organization's success and competitive advantage (Saks, 2021). Currently, the global economic and social development model has undergone major changes (Toth, Heinänen, & Nisula, 2020). With the rising of the knowledge economy, intellectual resources have gradually replaced energy and material resources as the core elements of productivity development, and the competition of talents, especially high-level talents, such as knowledge workers has gradually become the focus of competition among knowledge-based organizations (Figurska, 2015). In the era of the knowledge economy, the engagement of knowledge workers should be paid more attention to than that of non-knowledge workers (Liwei,

2018). China has a quarter of the world's population which also has plenty of knowledge workers (Li, Castaño, & Li, 2018), thus the research on employee engagement in Chinese knowledge workers will have a great impact on human resource management.

In China, the engagement level and work performance of knowledge workers in tertiary education determine the efficiency and quality of tertiary education, as well as the healthy and sustainable development of tertiary education (Yan, 2020). However, a survey from ADP Research Institute of over 19,000 workers across the globe in 2019 shows that China's overall employee engagement level is very serious that Chinese's engagement percent of fully engaged is only 6% (Hayes, Chumney, Wright, & Buckingham, 2019), and specific to the knowledge workers in the field of tertiary education is also not optimistic. Through different forms of interviews, it is found that more than 50% of knowledge workers have different degrees of job burnout before they have been teaching for less than 5 years, some of them even start to get tired of teaching after less than 1 year, and nearly 30% of them want to quit and no longer engage in tertiary education. (Ping, Kerui, Xiangcheng, & Jin, 2020). In the face of multiple roles and academic pressures, knowledge workers in tertiary education are prone to emotional exhaustion, lack of personal characteristics, job frustration, and anxiety (Xiaobin, 2021). It's urgent to improve the employee engagement of the knowledge worker in tertiary education. This study focuses on the drivers of employee engagement of knowledge workers in tertiary education from a comprehensive perspective combined with organizational, external, and individual.

From the organizational perspective, organizational culture is thought to influence the levels of employee engagement while most of the studies were conducted at enterprises, and seldom done in the tertiary education area. In fact, the organizational culture in tertiary education has some problems in China. Some managers and leaders take advantage of their positions for personal gain like academic misconduct and moral corruption (Shihua, 2015). Besides that, the demand for tertiary teachers to further study and do research is increasing. This situation leads teachers to have a poor organizational culture for some teachers do not spend their energy on teaching, but more on scientific research (Ximing, Huifeng, & Ling, 2019), professional title evaluation, doctoral study, and so on for personal purposes (Jiajin, 2016; Shihua, 2015).

Besides organizational culture, researchers hypothesized that perceived supervisory support has a significant positive correlation with employee engagement (Shi & Gordon, 2020). However, most of the empirical research on the impact of perceived supervisory support on employee engagement was derived from private sector organizations (e.g., Menguc, Auh, Fisher,& Haddad, 2013; Brough et al., 2013) ((Jin & McDonald, 2016). Also, it has not been given sufficient consideration in China.

From the external perspective, With the development of technology, like mobile phone technology (including smartphones, tablets, laptop computers, and personal digital assistants) that enable new ways to work (e.g., smartphone calls, emails, videoconferences). however, research about its effects is still in its infancy (Nijp, Beckers, van de Voorde, Geurts, & Kompier, 2016). only a few studies have examined the relationship between new ways of working and employee engagement (Van Steenbergen, van der Ven, Peeters, & Taris, 2018), and which results are contradictory. On the one hand, new ways of working has been related to some benefits, such as improved employee engagement, connectivity among staff, and work-related flow (Kotera & Vione, 2020). On the other hand, some negative effects have also been found that new ways of

working increase blurred work-home boundaries and reduce employee engagement (Diaz, Chiaburu, Zimmerman, & Boswell, 2012). As it can be seen, whether the new ways of working will have a positive impact or negative impact on employee engagement in China's context should be further supplemented.

From the individual perspective, researchers found that curiosity is an important individual difference variable in work settings. And previous researches show that curiosity has comprehensive benefits in the workplace, for example, curious feelings can serve to expand knowledge, help to enhance intellectual and innovation ability, and improve social skills hence strengthening social relationships (Von Stumm, Hell, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2011). Hence, curiosity was taken as a moderator in this study.

Research Question

Research Question 1: Does organizational culture affect the employee engagement among knowledge workers in tertiary education in China.
Research Question 2: Does perceived supervisory support affect the employee engagement among knowledge workers in tertiary education in China.
Research Question 3: Does new ways of working affect the employee engagement among knowledge workers in tertiary education in China.
Research Question 4: Does curiosity can moderate the relationship between organizational culture and employee engagement among knowledge workers in tertiary education in China.
Research Question 5: Does curiosity can moderate the relationship between perceived supervisory support and employee engagement among knowledge workers in tertiary education in China.
Research Question 6: Does curiosity can moderate the relationship between new ways of working and employee engagement among knowledge workers in tertiary education in China.

Literature Reviews
Employee Engagement (EE)

The field of employee engagement has experienced unprecedented growth over the last three decades. The most widely accepted definition of employee engagement comes from Kahn, who defines personal engagement as 'the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances.' (p.694). Some burnout researchers like Maslach and Leiter (1997) regarded employee engagement as the opposite state of job burnout. In their views, there are three characteristics of engagement: energy, involvement, and efficacy which are opposite to the three dimensions of burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of efficacy (Maslach & Leiter,1997). Another important definition of engagement is from Schaufeli and Bakker (2004): 'An active, positive work-related state that is characterized by: vigor, dedication, and absorption' (p.295).

The factors influencing employee engagement can be concluded into three aspects: individual factors, organizational factors, and job characteristics factors. The individual factors influencing engagement mainly come from the demography variables, for example, gender and marriage state (Johnson 2004), occupations (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006)., personality

traits (Kim, Shin, & Swanger, 2009)., individual psychological state (Ababneh, 2020), etc. Another perspective of the factors influencing employee engagement is from the organizational aspects, including organizational culture, work environment, organizational justice, organizational support, etc. The culture and climate of an organization are thought to influence levels of employee engagement (Arifin, 2014; Nurcholis and Budi, 2020, McBain, 2007, Lockwood, 2007). Job characteristics are the attributes inherent in the job itself. Job enrichment and work-role fit, rewarding co-worker, supportive superiors, availability of work resources, skill utilization, task autonomy, and positive feedback have a positive correlation with employee engagement. (Broeck, Vansteenkiste, & Witte, 2008; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004).

Organizational Culture (OC)

Organizational culture refers to the values and beliefs that provide norms of expected behaviors that employees might follow (Schein, 2004). this study defines organizational culture as a set of values, beliefs, and norms that all members of an organization consciously abide by. It includes not only tangible rules and regulations but also intangible working atmosphere, working philosophy, and working values, which have an impact on the organization's values, beliefs, and behavior of the organization's members.

Previous researches show that organizational culture has a positive effect on employee engagement (Germano Reis, Trullen, & Story, 2016; Latta, 2020; Suharti & Suliyanto, 2012). Reis founds that two dimensions of the perceived organizational culture adhocracy and clan have a positive influence on employee engagement (Germano Reis et al., 2016). And organizational culture can mediate the relationship between new generation knowledge workers' work values and employee engagement (Zhou, Ye, & Gu, 2020). Organizational culture can influence employee engagement with the mediating effect of work values (Wei & Fang, 2017). In line with the above-discussed literature reviews, the first proposition assumes that: organizational culture has a positive effect on employee engagement.

Perceived Supervisory Support (PSS)

Perceived supervisory support refers to the extent to which employees perceive that their immediate superiors care about their interests, and give them material support, information support, emotional support, and recognize their value (Fengzuo, 2004).

Research showed that the perceived supervisory support can have an important effect on employee behavior, especially has a significant positive correlation with employee engagement Because when employees perceive their organizations and supervisors concerning their well-being, they may be more engaged at work in return to fulfill their obligations (Holland, Cooper, & Sheehan, 2016). Because when employees perceive their organizations and supervisors concerning their well-being, they may be more engaged at work in return to fulfill their obligations (Holland et al., 2016). An empirical study that uses social exchange theory shows that the perceived supervisory support has a positive effect on employee engagement which is mediated by the psychological empowerment in three service sector organizations in the Indian context (Jose & Mampilly, 2015). Fu Yang et al. (2018) did an empirical study that found that supervisor's support can improve subordinates' work engagement and as a result produce greater career satisfaction and career outcomes (Yang & Liu, 2018). In line with the above-discussed literature reviews, the

second proposition assumes that: that if superiors can recognize employees' contributions, truly care about employees, and provide them with support in various aspects, the perceived sense of support from superiors is bound to affect employee engagement.

New Ways of Working (NWW)

New ways of working it's a new approach that employees can organize their work flexibly; whereby employees can decide themselves when they work (schedule flexibility), where they work (telecommuting), and via which communication medium (smart-phone, e-mail, videoconference) they work (Baarne, Houtkamp, & Knotter, 2010). These flexible work designs are referred to as 'new ways of working'.

From 2020 to 2022, due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic situation, in order to further reduce the risk of communication caused by personnel flow and aggregation, more and more enterprises have implemented new ways of working such as online remote collaborative work mode. However, the research of the new ways of working as the driver of employee engagement needs further investigated, whether the new ways of working boost employee engagement because it offers employees more control over their work process or exhaust employees due to the work connectivity for 24 hours (Brummelhuis, Bakker, Hetland, & Keulemans, 2012). Ter Hoeven (2016) found that communication technology use can change the way of employee's work and improve employee engagement by enhancing communication efficiency and accessibility; while reducing engagement by increasing work unpredictability and interruptions (Ter Hoeven, van Zoonen, & Fonner, 2016). In this study, the proposition is that the new ways of working will enhance engagement as long as we can find a balance between being available for work-related communication, while simultaneously guarding uninterrupted working time, then it will have a positive effect on employee engagement (Gerards, de Grip, & Baudewijns, 2018).

Curiosity

Curiosity is an individual's tendency to know new things and unknown things, and it is one of the important intrinsic motivations of an individual. As an important personality trait, curiosity has been paid close attention to by many scholars in the fields of philosophy, education, and psychology (Berlyne, 1960, 1954; Day, 1982; Loewenstein, 1994; Mussel, 2010). The concepts underlying the present study focus upon trait aspects of curiosity, which is a personality trait that helps the individual to be interested in new things and enjoying to have an open attitude to things and not easy to change. So, in this study, the definition of curiosity is a multifaceted persistent trait that motivates people to seek out and explore a wide range of novel stimuli (Collins 2000).

Kashdan (2020) found that curiosity has comprehensive benefits in the workplace, the workplace curiosity dimensions can predict job satisfaction, work engagement, job crafting, healthy work relationships, and innovation (Kashdan et al., 2020). This study argues that curiosity is an important variable for employee engagement, and it may play an indirect role in employee engagement, for example, as a moderator affecting the relationship between engagement and other variables. The person who is curiosity will be like to exchange ideas with others and extroverted like to communicate with others, at the workplace environment, curious workers are more apt to proactively seek feedback, ask open-ended questions during the acquisition of feedback, and

effectively cope with ambivalent feedback from coworkers and supervisors (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017). According to the person-organization fit theory, we can have a hypothesis that the personality of curiosity may moderate the relationship between organizational culture to employee engagement. Besides, the curious employees have open personalities which can help them have a better relationship with their coworkers and supervisors, which moderates the relationship between perceived supervisory support and employee engagement. Curiosity has been considered a basic instinct of intelligent species, that enabled them to learn and master new things, master how to use tools, and ultimately make technological advances (Arnone, Small, Chauncey, & McKenna, 2011). Therefore, curiosity may have a positive effect on employees to learn and master the new ways of working, and moderates the relationship between new ways of working and employee engagement.

Research Framework

This study was conducted to investigate the relationship between the independent variables of organizational culture, perceived supervisory support, new ways of working, and dependent variables of employee engagement and the relationship with the moderator of curiosity. A comprehensive framework was developed based on the support of literature reviews. The framework comprises three independent variables and one moderator which will be tested on the relationship or the influencing level towards the dependent variable of employee engagement as shown in Figure 1.
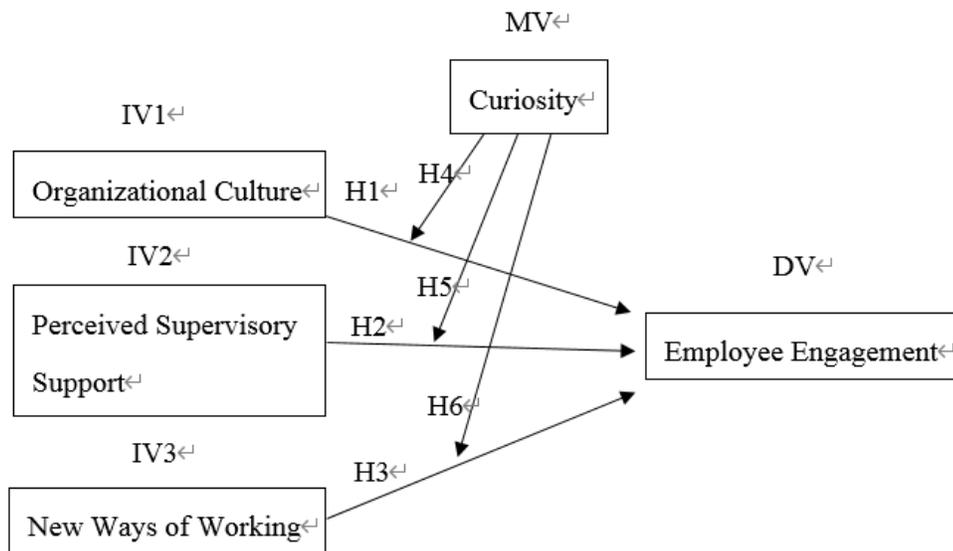

Figure 1.   Research Framework

Methodology

This research will use a quantitative descriptive approach. The measuring instrument will be used in this research as follows: the measurement of employee engagement will use Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) -9 which created by Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova (2006). The measurement of organizational culture will use Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) which created by Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn (2006). The measurement of perceived supervisory support was developed by Wang Fengzuo (2004), the measurement of new

ways of working was developed by Van Steenbergen (2018) and the measurement of curiosity will use Curiosity Exploration Inventory (CEI- II) which created by Kashdan et al.(2009).

Conclusions

The employee engagement has a very significant effect on organization's success. Since the knowledge worker in tertiary education face increasing pressure, which leads the employee engagement level of them was not optimistic. To a large extent, enhancing the engagement of knowledge workers in tertiary education can promote the cultivation of higher talents in China and realize the rejuvenation of the country through science and education. Therefore, it is necessary to study the driver of the employee engagement of knowledge workers in tertiary education in China. The present study's aim was to find out whether there is a significant relationship between organizational culture, perceived supervisory support, new ways of working on employee engagement with the moderate effect of curiosity among knowledge workers in tertiary education in China. Furthermore, this study was conducted among knowledge workers in tertiary education in China. This research would be very much ponderable and adds significance to the tertiary education world due to the lack of study among knowledge worker in tertiary education in China. Theoretically, the findings of the study directing to the management of tertiary education institution that they should give importance to organizational culture, perceived supervisory support, new ways of working, curiosity in order to improve employee engagement.

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