

## Determinants of Employee Engagement in the South African Hospitality Industry During COVID-19 Lockdown Epoch: Employee Perception

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### Abstract

Employee engagement has emerged as an important concept in hospitality management as well as in human resources management fields. The purpose of the study was to assess the determinants of employee engagement in the South African hospitality industry. The study was conducted against a backdrop caused by volatile uncertain, complex and ambiguous business environments in which business and hotels in general operate exposing employees in the hotel industry to serve in very difficult conditions due to the nature of the diverse and changing needs of their clients. The study used a sample of 260 employees from 15 hotels within and around eThekweni municipality territorial jurisdiction. A cross-sectional survey was used based on a deductive research approach. Both quantitative and qualitative data was collected using a questionnaire. Research findings submits that hotels that put a strong emphasis on cultivating engaged workers reap substantial rewards. Employees who report being engaged at work have been shown to perform better at work, as employee involvement is related to organisational results such as efficiency, organisational citizenship, and overall job performance. The researcher recommends that organisations should examine the possible relationships between engagement and performance-related outcome variables that indicate improving engagement, as these provide a competitive advantage over rivals.

**Keywords:** Employee engagement; hospitality industry; human resource; covid-19 lockdown

### Introduction

Employee engagement has become a top priority for today's leaders, who are constantly searching for new ways to keep their employees engaged. Every day, management is put to the test in terms of its ability to keep employees involved while still enforcing the policies set out. Employee turnover has triggered high attrition rates in various industries, as workers are found to be continually changing employment (Toyama & Mauno, 2017). As a result, in these uncertain economic times, retaining and engaging employees has become a challenge. Several human resource (HR) professionals are conducting surveys and studies all over the world to come to conclusions about the factors that influence employee engagement. In this paper, the researchers look at the different factors that influence employee engagement in the workplace in the hospitality industry. These influencing factors are often referred to as employee engagement determinants. The term employee engagement can be defined in a number of ways. Stoyanova and Iliev (2017) posit that an engaged employee is one who generates results, rarely

switches jobs and most importantly, serves as a consistent representative of the organisation. According to Walden, Jung and Westerman (2017), an engaged employee's productivity is described as a result obtained by igniting an employee's passion for work and channelling it toward the organisational success. However, this outcome is only achievable when an employer offers an implied contract to workers who exhibit specific positive behaviours that are consistent with the goals of the organisation.

According to Ryan and Deci (2020), an employee's degree of engagement may be classified as "engaged", "not engaged", or "disengaged". Employees who are engaged work with zeal to achieve the organisation's objectives. Employees who are "not engaged" seem to be interested, but not with the same zeal and enthusiasm for the organisation's shared goal. Disengaged employees are dissatisfied with their employment (Shuck & Wollard, 2008). Basically, along similar lines, employee engagement can also be classified into three distinct but related aspects which are "Intellectual engagement", which refers to a commitment to improving one's job performance, "affective engagement", which entails feeling helpful and optimistic after one's job performance, and finally "social engagement", which involves an employee engaged in conversations with others about how to enhance work-related changes (Sandra, 2018). According to modern human resource management research and practice, high-quality work applicants are increasingly looking for jobs that offer challenges, development, and involvement (Harter & Blacksmith, 2010). Organisations must therefore have working contexts that provide a good match between prospective employees' job expectations and their subsequent working environment in order to attract and maintain high calibre, high performing, creative, dedicated, and engaged employees (Morgeson & Dierdorff, 2011). An integrative review of literature on the person-organisation fit, notes that selection and socialisation are frequently touted as the keys to maintaining the agile and dedicated workforce required to meet today's competitive challenges. Performance and commitment have traditionally been linked to fit (May et al., 2004; Saks & Gruman, 2011).

## Context

The global business environment is increasingly becoming complex due to changing technological advancements, competitive rivalry, and consumers' changing demands (Permana, Tjakraatmadja, Larso & Wicaksono, 2015). The employees in the hotel industry are increasingly becoming exposed to serving in very difficult conditions due to the nature of the diverse and changing needs of their clients (Paek, Schuckert, Kim & Lee, 2015). However, in such complex business environments, organisations are failing to balance their competitive position and the sustained wellbeing of their employees (Inceoglu et al., 2018). Although the concept of employee engagement is now well known, what remains gloomy, is which HRM practices drive employee engagement and how best it can be measured. To compound this, Cooke, Dickman and Parry (2020) state that there is limited employee-oriented research on HRM practices on employee engagement and let alone the hotel industry. Most studies conducted particularly in developed world remain acontextual and mostly failed to link the gap between theory and practice by embedding an integrated system of practices and procedures (Albrecht et al., 2015).

Given the uncertainty of the volatile business environment, there is need for organisations to adapt in response for sustained competitive advantage (Permana et al., 2015). While this change is necessary, such kind of an organisation requires people or employees as enablers of success. Employees are critical in the functioning of the organisation by formulating and executing strategies (Maamari & Majdalani, 2017). Although most organisations realise the importance of their employees, some are however failing to balance

between their competitive position and the sustained wellbeing of their employees (Inceoglu, Thomas, Chu, Plans & Gerbasi, 2018).

The employees in the hotel industry are exposed to serving in very difficult conditions due to the nature of the diverse needs of their clients (Paek et al., 2015). Such difficulties include working very long hours, autocratic leadership, and failure to be recognised in terms of talent (Saks & Gruman, 2011). Due to long working hours, employees may fail to balance work and life needs. The nature of such industry requires a high level of commitment and loyalty to the organisation which might not be comparable to their remuneration (Paek et al., 2015). While the need to earn a living may be the main motive people work, it does not follow that money is always the motivating factor. Non-financial factors may be crucial to the wellbeing of employees (Anitha, 2014). Conservatively, it is estimated that less than 30% of hotel workers report even partial engagement with their work (Carter, Nesbit, Badham, Parker & Sung, 2018), and recent research has suggested significant engagement declines worldwide, especially in the context of developing economies such as South Africa. Owing to the realisation of the need of a productive workforce, human resource development specialists are increasingly being asked to assist in the development of workplace strategies for promoting employee engagement (Carter et al., 2018). Employee engagement is defined as a person's "cognitive, emotional, and behavioural condition aimed at achieving organisational goals" (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Employee engagement is regarded to include long-term emotional involvement and is a precursor to more fleeting employee sentiments like "job satisfaction and commitment" (Inceoglu et al., 2018).

Although the concept is gaining worldwide acceptance and human resource development specialists are increasingly being asked to assist in the development of workplace strategies for promoting employee engagement, what is of particular concern is what human resources strategies can be implemented to drive employee engagement (Farokhi & Murty, 2014). Further, it is not also known on how employee engagement can best be measured and assessed. Current studies have implored many different variables in measuring employee engagement with others using intermediate factors. This has thus made employee-oriented human resources management research, including the perceptions of employees of certain HRM practices and employee well-being oriented HRM practices insufficient in the current literature (Cooke et al., 2020). While many studies have applied employee engagement models in a real-life context, the majority of the studies failed to apply and embed engagement in an integrated system of HRM policies, practices and procedures (Walden et al., 2017). As a result, this caused a gap between theory and real-context application. Secondly, the majority of studies failed to take heed of organisational and business context making the understanding of engagement acontextual (Jha & Kumar, 2018). It is against this backdrop that the study seeks to assess the determinants of employee engagement in the South African hospitality industry.

### **Conceptual framework**

There are vast theoretical models on employee engagement with the widely used models identified as Kahn's 1990 model, Job-demands resources model and the social exchange theory. To remain focused on the scope of the study, the study tests the personal and organisational context factors' effect on employee engagement. Organisational behavioural aspects have a variety of implications (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001). Kahn (1990) and Maslach et al. (2001) looked at the antecedents within their models that are required for engagement. Central to the model are two types of employee engagement: "work" and "organisational". The model portrays concepts that seek to understand why workers are engaged in their jobs and in their organisations. Employee engagement can be understood in terms of Social exchange theory (SET), and there is a correlation between job and

organisational engagement, but they are two different concepts. Job Characteristics Model/Theory asserts that employee efficiency and job satisfaction can be increased by changing the task itself.

According to Kahn (1990), this sense can be accomplished by complex work, variation of work, the application of various skills, and personal discretion when making significant contributions to the business. As a result, employment with high core job characteristics will encourage employees to bring more of themselves to work and, consequently, be more engaged. According to SET, employees with enhanced jobs are more likely to react with higher levels of engagement. People have a natural ability to find meaning in their work. Employees deserve to feel like they are putting their time and effort into something worthwhile. It is now the duty of the organisation to encourage productive work and justify why a specific role is important to them. If at all possible, organisations should strive to change roles so that the individual suits the work. Employees will spend less time dealing with a job for which they have little aptitude, and their abilities will be turned into skills, enabling them to show their ‘best selves’.

Organisational and supervisory support entails the ability to express oneself within the organisation without fear of repercussions. This also enhances one’s influence within the organisation. Employees would have more chances to confidently try new things if they have positive and trusting relationships within the business. When an employee feels that the company and his or her co-workers care for his or her well-being, the employee may care about the organisation’s progress in achieving its goals and objectives. According to Bakker and Schaufeli (2008), a lack of social support has been related to burnout, which has a negative effect on employee engagement. Similarly, a lack of supervisory support has a detrimental effect on employee engagement. Employees tend to abandon individuals they work with rather than the organisations themselves. As a result, first-line managers play a critical role in employee engagement and are the source of employee disengagement (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). Therefore, management should determine which services and benefits workers need the most in order to improve employee engagement within the organisation. Accordingly, the perceived assistance of organisational supervisors is directly related to on-the-job resources and co-worker support.

## **The determinants of employee engagement**

### ***Organisational climate***

Organisational climate can be understood as a subset of culture (Langford, 2009). It can be explained as how employees perceive and evaluate their working environment as well as structures processes and events. According to Sparrow (2001), organisational climate is defined as the extent to which set of value orientation in an organisation are perceived as stable. These values include aspects of the organisation and management style, promoted values and permitted behaviours which guide behaviour of employees or members with respect to organisational effectiveness (Albrecht et al., 2015). The concept of an organisational climate can be traced to the works of (Kurt Lewin, 1939) who recognised that a particular group of individuals with a common interest will create for themselves a psychological environment or climate (Johnston & Spinks, 2013). Hence, organisational culture can therefore be described as consisting of customs, norms and values which guide moral conduct in an organisation (Datta & Singh, 2018).

Organisation climate is influenced by the organisation’s structure, the processes and systems by which work is carried out, attitude and behaviour of employees, organisation’s values and traditions, as well as the leadership or management styles (Farokhi & Murty, 2014). Management and leadership styles influence climate through HRM policies. These include

communicating expectations of practices and procedures to employees regarding their “knowledge, skills, motives, attitudes, norms, values, as well as anticipated behaviors inside their organisation”, and implementing a clear, consistent, and effective suite of HRM policies (Albrecht et al., 2018). The result of this is that it creates shared perceptions about the behaviours, attitudes, norms and values that are perceived as essential for individual and organisational performance (Albrecht et al., 2018). When related to employee engagement, employee experiences of HRM practices aimed towards optimising individual, group or organisational effectiveness will increase chances of achievement of organisational goals (Albrecht et al., 2015). When linked to Kahn’s framework, climate relates employees’ perception of the safety of an organisational environment in relation to their wellbeing. How employees perceive wellbeing and harm is related to employees’ availing or withdrawal of their physical, cognitive and/or emotional engagement (Kaliannan & Adjovu, 2015).

### ***Organisational learning and employee engagement***

Organisational learning in volatile or uncertain environments is perceived as enhancing competitive advantage and overall organisational performance (Hanaysha, 2016). It can be defined as the reinforcement and support of continuous learning and its application to organisational improvement, as well as the acquisition of knowledge, distribution, and sharing of learning (Datta & Singh, 2018). Employee perceptions of the organisation’s beneficial activities in assisting them in creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge (e.g., opportunities for continuous learning, inquiry and dialogue, empowerment toward a collective vision, and a learning leadership) are referred to as the perceived learning climate (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016). In relation to employee engagement, organisational learning can be related to the job-demands resources theory. Learning can be conceptualised as a job resource or aspect of work that is functional in achieving work-related goals as well as promoting opportunities for personal growth (Datta & Singh, 2018). In that sense, learning is vital in fostering engagement because employees can extrinsic and intrinsic motivational potentials to achieve work goals or personal development objectives (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016). However, learning provides a challenge to organisation in seeking to retain good employees as providing skills and opportunities to expand their personal goals would make them attractive elsewhere (Hanaysha, 2016).

### ***Leadership style***

Kahn (1990) depicts leadership as having a significant impact on follower (employee) attitudes or views regarding psychological safety by providing (or suppressing) a supportive environment in which people feel safe to actively embrace work (Popli & Rizvi, 2016). Leadership styles have been studied as predictors of employee engagement and subsequent outcomes, based on these theoretical premises. Leadership at the team level, for example, has been shown to be a possible source of employee engagement. Supervisors lead people through establishing a shared psychological model and supporting collective processes, according to the leader-focused perspective (Mehra, Smith, Dixon & Robertson, 2006). While charismatic leadership assembles creative behaviour through the mediation of employee involvement, transformational leadership is positively associated with the age of imaginative thoughts and work practices that are innovative (Bae, Song, Park, & Kim, 2013). (Huang, Ahlstrom, Lee, Chen & Hsieh, 2016).

Employee-oriented leadership is likewise discussed about as a resource that urges employees to have any kind of effect with what they do. Leaders with this viewpoint help employees to start to lead the team and support their proactive practices (Hannah & Lester, 2009). According to Tran and Park (2015), inclusive leadership is positively associated with

employee engagement because it encourages receptivity to employee information and aids in the resolution of difficulties that arise during development efforts. Another precursor to engagement is the strength of an employee's relational interactions at work. Employees will connect more unequivocally in their jobs if they trust their supervisors, believing them to be fit, legit, and trustworthy (Chughtai & Buckley, 2011). Agarwal (2014) found that intimate supervisory relationships have a stronger influence on engagement than distal hierarchical support, and that it is primarily driven by leader-employee interaction. According to Toyama and Mauno (2017), team cohesion leads to collective task engagement, and peer support encourages employees to take on difficulties without fearing the consequences of failing.

### ***Employee recognition and employee engagement***

Employee recognition can be defined in general as the personal non-financial rewards (appreciation, interest and approval) for an individuals' talent, efforts and work achievements as a reinforcement of the desired behaviour demonstrated by the employee (Pigeon, Montani & Boudrias, 2017). The effect of employee recognition on employee engagement can be explained from the social exchange theory perspective (Kwon & Kim, 2020). The theory assumes reciprocal balances between employer and employee interactions. Employees feel bound to respond with a reciprocal level of participation if an organisation provides them socio-emotional resources. Contrarywise, employees are more likely to disengage when the organisation is (or perceived as) foregoing adequate compensation (Langford, 2009).

### ***Pay and benefit rewards***

Rewards can be in the form of financial (extrinsic) rewards like pay, bonus or incentives. They can also be non-financial benefits like "extra holidays or voucher schemes, or a combination of both financial and non-financial benefits" (Zainol, Mohd-Hussin & Othman, 2016). The linkage between employee engagement and pay and benefit rewards can also be explained through the social exchange theory. Employees feel obligated to be engaged if they perceive that their pay and benefits are reciprocal to the services that they render within the organisation (Kwon & Kim, 2020). However, when employees perceive their remuneration as unfair, less competitive or when the organisation is slow to respond to the changing environment, they are likely to disengage (Langford, 2009).

### ***Information and communication***

Information and communication may refer to the internal exchange of information between the organisation and employees to promote a sense of transparency and trust among employees (Zainol et al., 2016). Through the Kahn's model, information and communication can be related to the creation of a positive organisational climate where employees are comfortable to share openly their physical, cognitive and emotional sentiments. Further, it is postulated that if employees receive timely, adequate and the right kind of information pertaining their job they feel more engaged to execute their job unlike when they are assumed to know what they are supposed to do. Information and communication do not only relate to work-related matters but also to the organisation's strategy. If the organisation's strategy is well communicated to employees and they feel that management's decisions are aligned with organisation's strategy they will be engaged to the job. The purpose of communicating the organisation's strategy is that it makes employees have a sense of ownership of the strategy as well as involving them in strategy formulation (Kwon & Kim, 2020).

### ***Employee wellness and employee engagement***

The overall health and wellbeing of employees is increasingly becoming important in leadership and staff development. Good health and wellbeing have been classified as modern grand challenge, for instance, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) number 3 of the United Nations (UN) focuses on ‘good health and wellbeing’ (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016). The job demand-resources theory shows that work contexts perceived by employees as supporting their physical, psychological and emotional needs are conducive to the optimal performance (engagement) of employees (Albrecht et al, 2015). The presence or absence of a wellness program in an organisation can reflect on the organisation’s climate where it is perceived by employees as contributing to wellbeing or harm is related to employees’ availing or withdrawal of their physical, cognitive and/or emotional engagement (Kaliannan & Adjovu, 2015).

### ***Training and development***

Training and development are efforts by the employer specifically made to develop and empower employees with knowledge and skills that can be utilised in their jobs (Zainol et al., 2016). Kahn (1990) identified psychological availability as referring to one’s belief as having the required physical, cognitive and emotional resources in the performance of a role. This psychological capital was found influenced by depletion of physical and emotional energy, lack of individual security as well as outside lives. The purpose of training and development is thus to provide employees or newcomers with the knowledge and skills (psychological) they need to feel available (Albrecht et al., 2015).

### **Methodology**

This study explored the determinants of employee engagement in the South African hospitality industry. Against the backdrop of volatile uncertain, complex and ambiguous business environments in which business and hotels in general operate exposing employees in the hotel industry to serve in very difficult conditions due to the nature of the diverse and changing needs of their clients, the study used a sample of 260 employees from 15 hotels within and around eThekweni municipality territorial jurisdiction. There are wide research strategies that have been applied in the empirical research. These strategies include case studies, surveys, experiment and narrative enquiries (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The choice of a research strategy is based mainly upon the research objectives and questions of the study. Other factors such as the research approach and philosophy of the researcher also influences such choice. In this current study, a cross-sectional survey was adopted using the case South African-based hotels to provide evidence on the determinants of employee engagement.

A cross-sectional design was adopted in the study since longitudinal designs are only suitable for survey studies that are repeated over time or a single survey that enquire about measurements over time. Although such surveys provide greater confidence for testing of causal inferences between variables as compared to cross-sectional designs because they more easily establish temporal priority (Kashy, Ackerman & Donnellan, 2018), the choice of a cross-sectional survey was mainly influenced by the nature of the study which did not permit access to historical data on the perceptions of employees regarding employee engagement or its determinants. Longitudinal designs are mostly appropriate where there is readily available historical data on a database. Although such surveys can be conducted on a yearly basis, it presents challenges associated with matching employees to their previous responses. The research study was thus limited by providing research findings that are only particular to the current time setting of the study on South African hotels.

A purposive convenient sampling approach was used for qualitative part of research, with non-managerial staffers as the potential targets. Formal permissions to contact research

were obtained from HR managers of concerned hotels. Since the permissions were obtained through the HR department, the researchers deemed it convenient to make use of the same HR managers as the contact persons for the distribution of the research instrument. Accordingly, the qualitative data was collected using an electronic questionnaire through the HR department, with the HR managers as the contact persons for each hotel involved. For the quantitative part of research, about eighteen (18) participants per hotel were conveniently sampled with the help of HR managers to ensure an even representation from all functional departments of the participating hotels.

Given the national lockdown situation due to COVID-19, a telephone arrangement would be made with managers concerned before emailing out the electronic questionnaire for printing and distribution. To uphold the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, the researchers supplied a locked wooden response box wherein the completed responses would be dropped. However, the response box would be in the custody of the HR manager as the contact person wherefrom the researchers would fetch the response box after two (2) days. The conduct persons did not have access to the completed questionnaires. Qualitative data was analysed thematically, whilst quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

### **Findings and discussion**

The involvement of employees in strategy was found positive but statistically insignificant. Remuneration, training and development, and employee wellness variables were found negative but statistically insignificant in influencing employee engagement. The results obtained fail to support propositions made in literature review that remuneration, training and development, and employee wellness influence employee engagement. It is thus concluded in this study that the factors remuneration, training and development, and employee wellness are not always significant determinants of employee engagement in the South African hotel industry. Rather, the factors organisational climate, leadership employee recognition, as well as information and communication were all found positive and statistically significant in explaining variations in employee engagement. Information and communication were found as the chief predictors of employee engagement in the South African hotel industry with a t-statistic of 3.56 and the beta coefficient of 0.251 implies units increase in engagement after a unit increase in information and communication, holding other factors constant. These results were similar to those in the Malaysian hotel industry (Zainol et al., 2016). Peng and Chen (2019) similarly found employee engagement as strongly predicted by good internal communication, and a reputation of integrity. Moreover, Lockwood (2007) strongly encouraged transparent and consistent internal communication from leadership as an antecedent of employee engagement. In the context of this study as shown by the Pearson's correlation, information and communication depends on a mixture of factors such leadership, organisational climate, remuneration, and wellness in either directions. It is thus concluded in this study that information and communication is a major determinant of employee engagement in the South African hotel industry.

Organisational climate was found positive and statistically significant in causing variations in employee engagement. This was second in ranking after information and communication with a t-statistic of 2.94. The beta coefficient of 0.231 means that 1-unit increase in perceived positive climate results in 0.231-unit increase in scale of engagement. The implications for these results show that organisational climate is a significant factor in determining the engagement of employees in the South African hotel industry context. A positive organisational climate consists of physical, psychological and emotionally safe environment that will motivate employees to engaged at work (Anitha, 2013). While on the

other hand, Rich, Lepine and Crawford (2010) argue that employee engagement results in various aspects pertaining to the workplace atmosphere. Results of correlational analysis shows that the factors leadership, recognition, information and communication, remuneration and wellness were significant and statistically correlated with organisational climate. Information and communication had a strong correlation coefficient ( $r = 0.712$ ) followed by Leadership ( $r = 0.672$ ), then talent recognition ( $r = 0.652$ ), remuneration and rewards ( $r = 0.596$ ) and finally wellness ( $r = 0.590$ ). These results show that organisational climate can be managed through these factors and can in turn foster supportive working environment. Such an environment typically portrays a level of concern for employees' needs and feeling, providing positive feedback and encouraging them express their voice over certain specific concerns (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In conclusion, a meaningful organisational climate that aids employees for interpersonal harmony is a key determinant of employee engagement.

Leadership, when tested as a predictor of engagement, was found statistically significant and positive with a third rank ( $t$ -statistic = 1.94) where the beta coefficient represented that a unit increase in perceived leadership would result in 0.143 units increase in the scale of engagement. According to Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing and Peterson, (2008), effective leadership is a multi-dimensional and higher-order construct that comprises self-awareness, relational transparency, balance communication, and internalised moral standards. The results of the study are similar to the results that were obtained in Ashton (2017), where leadership was found as one of the most significant determinants of employee engagement in Thai hotel industry. Similar results were also found in Northern Taiwan (Peng & Chen, 2019). Correlational results showed that the factors namely 'recognition' ( $r = 0.784$ ), 'training and development' ( $r = 0.119$ ), 'information and communication' ( $r = 0.733$ ), 'remuneration' ( $r = 0.675$ ) and 'wellness' ( $r = 0.611$ ) were positive and significant in the study to constitute a perceived effective leadership. This implies that leaders are perceived as effective in the South African hotel industry if they are effective in addressing these factors. Kahn (1990) argue that leadership has been portrayed as exerting much influence on follower (employee) feelings or perceptions about the psychological safety by providing (or suppressing) a supportive environment in which employees feel safe to fully engage work (Popli & Rizvi, 2016). It is concluded in this study that effective leadership is a key significant determinant on employee engagement in the Sotuth African hotel industry. Employee recognition or talent recognition in this study was also found positive and statistically significant in influencing variations in employee engagement at 10% level of significance with a  $t$ -statistic of 1.83. The beta coefficient of 0.138 implies that a unit increase in employees' perception scale on employee recognition results in 0.138 units increase in employee engagement scale. Employee recognition consists of personal non-financial rewards (appreciation, interest and approval) for an individuals' talent, efforts and work achievements as a reinforcement of the desired behaviour demonstrated by the employee (Pigeon, Montani & Boudrias, 2017). The results obtained in the study confirm the social exchange theory as hypothesised by Kwon and Kim (2020). The recognition of employee efforts by the employer represents reciprocal balances between employer-employee interactions. If an organisation offers employees socio-emotional resources, they feel obligated to respond with a reciprocal level of engagement (Kwon & Kim, 2020). Contrarywise, employees are more likely to disengage when the organisation is perceived as foregoing adequate compensation (Kwon & Kim, 2020). In this study it is concluded that employee recognition is a significant determinant of employee engagement in the South African hotel industry.

## Implications and conclusion

The implications of this study can be analysed as having theoretical implications and also having practical implications. For the theoretical implications, the study has contributed to research by synthesising theory with a real-life context since many prior studies on employee engagement used various theoretical approaches but without applying and embedding engagement in an integrated system of HRM policies, practices and procedures (Albrecht et al., 2015). As a result, this caused a gap between theory and real-context application. This has been overcome by using the strategic engagement model of Albrecht et al. (2015). Secondly, the majority of studies failed to take heed of organisational and business context making the understanding of engagement acontextual (Jha & Kumar, 2018). A few studies were conducted in the hospitality context. Further, the study is a first of its kind to the knowledge of the researchers within the South African hotel industry context to use statistical inference as most prior studies were limited in using only qualitative research methods in their studies. This has been overcome by using mixed methods approach based on a positivist research philosophy. On the part of practical implications, the extent to which leadership/management in the South African hotel industry can improve employee engagement is argued in this report to depend on the evidence provided in this study. First by increasing efforts on specific items found in the study to positively increase in line with employee engagement. Second, to improve on areas that were found inversely related to employee engagement.

In order for management to increase employee engagement, the following steps may be considered: Leadership and management may increase transparency through regular communication and feedback with employees on matters pertaining to remuneration. Involvement of the HR function in the strategic formulation process as well as its strategic human capital would make employees more engaged in their service delivery when on duty. Adequately rewarding employees in relation to performance rendered through performance-based reward systems could work to the good of the employer through committed workers. There is need for timely provision of uniforms and work-related equipment. If employees are required to provide for themselves uniforms and work-related equipment, management may provide them allowances with the exception of independent contractors. The provision of uniforms and work-related equipment reduces the possibility of work-related injuries thus increasing job safety which translates to a positive organisational climate. Further, it is a demonstration by leadership that they are concerned for the overall health and welfare of employees. Understaffing and work overload problem may be solved by reducing job requirements when employees are limited. However, this may not be applicable when demand is high. Alternatively, overtime system may be introduced as stipulated by the law of the land and all the necessary labour laws. Another alternative would be to hire employees on a short-term contract basis at times when demand is very high. Lastly, leadership and management may conduct employee engagement surveys frequently, say on annual basis and act upon employee sentiments. While acting upon employee sentiments is crucial, care should be taken not to act solely on employee requirements while neglecting the needs and requirements of other stakeholders. Further, caution can be exercised not to take myopic decisions. Employee decisions should be taken in consideration of wider stakeholder needs as well as on a long-term basis to avoid managerial myopia.

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