

DETERMINANTS AND OUTCOMES OF JOB ENGAGEMENT IN THE POST-PANDEMIC IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The economic and social conditions of Sri Lanka in post-pandemic have created a challenging and uncertain atmosphere around the lives of employees and their engagement level at work. According to some studies, such uncertain, unclear, inconsistent, and unpredictable situations result in a negative impact on job engagement while some other studies suggest that such a situation has a positive impact on job engagement. Job engagement is an important factor in achieving organizational goals, revenue, and profits as it is directly linked with employee retention, absenteeism, and productivity. Furthermore, human resources are the most valuable asset for any organization. Therefore, it is important to examine how employees engaged in their jobs in the post-pandemic for the survival and long-term success of any organization during such a threatening situation. This study investigated the determinants of job engagement, outcomes of job engagement and mediating role of job engagement in the post-pandemic answering research questions; what are the determinants of job engagement in the post-pandemic, what are the outcomes of job engagement in the post-pandemic and whether job engagement mediate the relationship between these determinants and outcomes The independent variables of the study were job engagement determinants while job engagement outcomes were considered as the dependent variables. The mediating variable of the study was job engagement. The study referred to Kahn's model, Saks model, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, and AON Hewitt's model in developing the conceptual model. A self-administered survey questionnaire was used for the data collection. A convenient sampling technique was used to select the survey participants. The results showed job engagement acts as a mediator for job engagement determinants and outcomes during the period. The study found that foundation and differentiator determinants significantly affect job engagement while job satisfaction, affective commitment, and psychological resilience act as the outcomes of job engagement. The results of the study further reflected the application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory emphasizing basic levels of needs should fulfilled first to move to the next level in the hierarchy Thus, the study implied that organizations should fulfill employees' basic requirements to enhance their engagement at work to gain stability and business success in an uncertain and unstable situation. The study suggests investigating determinants and outcomes of job engagement in a much larger sample and further examining the organizational identification variable in future studies.

Keywords: Determinants, Economic crisis, Job engagement, Outcomes, Post-pandemic

1. Introduction

Since 2019 Sri Lanka has faced a series of tragic events including the Easter Sunday bomb attack, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an economic crisis. These unexpected incidents have created an uncertain, unclear, inconsistent, and unpredictable atmosphere that significantly influenced society and the economy. These challenging conditions have a colossal impact on the lives of employees and their engagement levels at work. Job engagement of employees is directly related to the efficiency, productivity, quality, profit, and revenue of any organization. Therefore, job engagement is considered one of the most preferred requirements in any organizational context (Rees et al., 2013; Jha et al., 2019).

1.1. Scope and objectives

This study investigated the determinants and outcomes of job engagement of employees in the post-pandemic period in Sri Lanka. First, the study investigated the determinants of job engagement in the post-pandemic period. Second, the study examined possible job engagement outcomes during the post-pandemic. Lastly, the study examined whether job engagement acts as a mediator between job engagement determinants and outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Job engagement

Job engagement was first introduced by Kahn in 1990. It is a multidimensional motivational concept that reflects the simultaneous investment of an individual's physical, cognitive, and emotional energy in active work performance which is a positive, two-way relationship between employees and his or her workplace (Rich et al., 2010). Though some prior studies have addressed the negative impact of unclear, inconsistent, unpredictable, unexpected or threatening situations on job engagement (Kahn, 1990; Reinwald et al., 2021), some other studies have highlighted that such events can have a positive impact on an individual's job engagement (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020; Giménez-Espert et al., 2020). The present study has the potential to be a major contributor to explaining the reasons for this contradiction in the existing literature since job engagement is proposed as a mediator.

2.2. Determinants and outcomes of job engagement

An individual's job engagement is determined by three psychological factors: meaningfulness which is a feeling of valued by oneself as well as by others: emotional and psychological availability to perform job assignments and safety and safe work relationships at the workplace (Kahn, 1990; Yuan et al., 2021). According to the Saks model job engagement determinants, job engagement and job engagement outcomes are interconnected (Saks, 2006). The AON Hewitt model categorizes job engagement determinants under two major categories; foundation and differentiators (Hinzmann et al., 2019). The foundation includes basics, company practices, and the work while differentiators encompass brand, leadership, and performance. Moreover, the model states that engaged employees positively speak about their workplace to others, they

have a sense of belonging and desire as a member of their organization and are motivated to go to extra lengths to contribute to the success of the organization. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Jerome, 2013), basic needs are at the lowest level in the hierarchy pyramid which includes physiological and safety needs. In order to satisfy psychological needs and self-actualization needs, basic needs should be fulfilled first. Based on the above theoretical concepts, a conceptual model was developed for the study identifying foundation and differentiators as independent variables, and organizational identification, job satisfaction, affective commitment, and psychological resilience as dependent variables. The conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

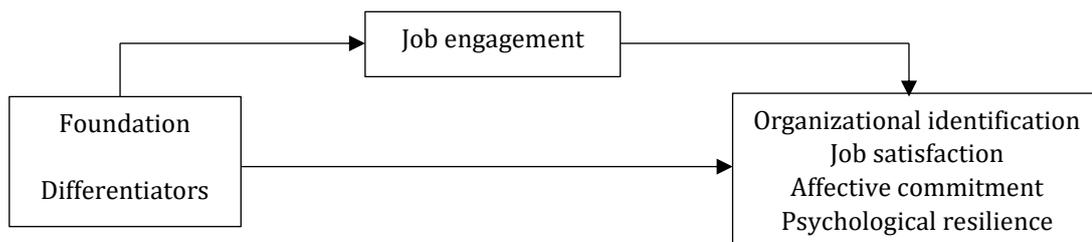


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

The foundation refers to the drivers that include core organizational infrastructure that are make-or-break elements needed for employees' engagement at their jobs. Under foundation basics, company practices and work have been considered. Prior studies suggested that foundation determinants positively related to organizational identification (Thurston & Glendon, 2018; Nakra, 2006; Salvatore et al., 2018). Therefore,

H1a: Foundation determinants are positively related to organizational identification.

Foundation determinants such as workplace conditions, workload, and organizational support can act as determinants of job satisfaction (Mihalca et al., 2021). For example, if employees have good workplace conditions or positive organizational support, they feel highly satisfied. Furthermore, employees have higher job satisfaction when their workload is reduced. Thus,

H1b: Foundation determinants are positively related to job satisfaction.

Fulfilment of basic needs, supportive organizational practices, effective communication, and work-related factors, such as autonomy and performance feedback, make employees feel that they are part of the organization that they work for. Therefore, they would be highly involved in work tasks and willingly pursue the organization's goals (Lee et al., 2021; Einwiller et al., 2021). Therefore,

H1c: Foundation determinants are positively related to affective commitment.

In an organization, good workplace and physical conditions, satisfaction of psychological needs, positive organizational practices and autonomy would make employees positively adapt to changes and maintain their mental health better even if they are exposed to stressors (Winwood et al., 2013; Barelllo & Graffigna, 2020). Therefore,

H1d: Foundation determinants are positively related to psychological resilience.

Differentiators are employees' engagement drivers that set their organization apart from its competitors and make it a place that they are proud to work for. The study considered the brand, leadership, and performance of the organization under differentiators. Organizational prestige and corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities can make employees feel responsible within the organization as well as outside the organization as an organizational member which can enhance his or her engagement at work (Smith, 2012). Therefore,

H1e: Differentiator determinants are positively related to organizational identification.

Similarly, CSR activities, leadership and goal progress can enhance employees' job satisfaction (Yeon et al., 2021; Koekemoer et al., 2021). Therefore,

H1f: Differentiator determinants are positively related to job satisfaction.

Moreover, prior studies suggested that CSR activities, leadership and employee performance are positively related to affective commitment (Astuty & Udin, 2020; Kaplan & Kaplan, 2018). Thus,

H1g: Differentiator determinants are positively related to affective commitment.

Furthermore, there is a positive relationship between employees' performance, leadership, and CSR involvement with psychological resilience according to existing findings. The findings further explain that these determinants can create psychological capital among employees by making a sense of esteem among themselves which results in psychological resilience among employees (Aguar-Quintana et al., 2021; Winwood et al., 2013; Southwick et al., 2019). Therefore,

H1h: Differentiator determinants are positively related to psychological resilience.

The literature supports that foundation determinants are positively related to job engagement. For example, work environment, organizational practices, and autonomy have a positive relationship with job engagement (Mihalca et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2021). Therefore,

H2a: Foundation determinants are positively related to job engagement.

Similarly, organizational brand, leadership and performance positively related to job engagement (Jung et al., 2021; Yeon et al., 2021; Aguiar-Quintana et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2021; Koekemoer et al., 2021). Thus,

H2b: Differentiator determinants are positively related to job engagement.

Furthermore, job engagement has a mediating effect over perceptions of job insecurity, turnover intent, job reattachment, personal protective equipment use, and task performance, and plays a crucial role in explaining the relationships between the engagement determinants and performance outcomes (Jung et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2021; Koekemoer et al., 2021; Rich et al., 2010). A few other studies also stated that job engagement is an important mediator between trait-based determinants and behavioural outcomes (Ployhart et al., 2021). Therefore,

H3: Job engagement mediates the relationship between the foundation and differentiator determinants and the outcomes.

3. Methodology

This is a cross-sectional study based on quantitative techniques. A self-administered survey questionnaire was designed in the English language to collect data. All the items in the questionnaire were adapted from prior studies. A convenient sample of 297 private sector employees from firms having more than 100 employees in the western province responded to the survey.

3.1. Measures

Six items were adopted from Carillo et al. (2021), Beus et al. (2019) and Mihalca et al. (2021) to measure foundation determinants (Cronbach's alpha = 0.886). Ten items were adopted from Jain (2013), Filimonau et al. (2020), Ojo et al. (2021), and Trougakos et al. (2020) to measure differentiator determinants (Cronbach's alpha = 0.980). Three items were adopted from Schaufeli and Salanova (2006) to measure job engagement (Cronbach's alpha = 0.820). Three items were adopted from Anaza and Rutherford (2012) to measure organizational identification (Cronbach's alpha = 0.804). Four items were adopted from Irawanto et al. (2021) to measure job satisfaction (Cronbach's alpha = 0.864). Five items were adopted from Rhoades et al. (2001) to measure affective commitment (Cronbach's alpha = 0.881). Four items were adopted from Aguiar-Quintana et al. (2021) to measure psychological resilience (Cronbach's alpha = 0.753).

3.2. Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS 28.0 software. Mediator analysis was also performed to test proposed relationships.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 gives the results of the correlational analysis. The results showed that all the variables correlate less than 0.9 indicating that there is no multicollinearity issue.

Table 1: Results of correlation analysis.

	F	D	OI	JS	AOC	PR
F	-					
D	.802 **	-				
OI	.007	-.144 *	-			
JS	.683 **	.851 **	.175 **	-		
AOC	.745 **	.860 **	.026	.846 **	-	
PR	.491 **	.784 **	-.304 **	.645 **	.816 **	-
M	.387 **	.410 **	.555 **	.552	.735 **	.482 **

Notes: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, F = Foundation, D = Differentiators, OI = Organizational identification, JS = Job satisfaction, AOC = Affective organizational commitment, PR = Psychological resilience, M = Job engagement.

Table 2 summarizes the results of the mediator analysis. Table 3 summarizes the results of the hypotheses testing.

Table 2. Results of mediator analysis.

Y	X	M	X → M	X → Y	
				Direct effect	Indirect effect(s) via M
OI	F	M	0.4084	-0.1578	0.1623
JS	F	M	0.4084	0.3750	0.0886
AOC	F	M	0.4084	0.6730	0.2527
PR	F	M	0.4084	0.2780	0.1030
OI	D	M	0.1753	-0.1167	0.0791
JS	D	M	0.1753	0.2064	0.0275
AOC	D	M	0.1753	0.3376	0.0950
PR	D	M	0.1753	0.2215	0.0248

Note: all $X \rightarrow M$ are significant, OI = Organizational identification, JS = Job satisfaction, AOC = Affective organizational commitment, PR = Psychological resilience, F = Foundation, D = Differentiators, M = Job engagement.

Table 3. Results of hypotheses testing.

Path	Hypothesis	Result
F → OI	H1a	Not supported
F → JS	H1b	Supported
F → AOC	H1c	Supported
F → PR	H1d	Supported
D → OI	H1e	Not supported
D → JS	H1f	Supported
D → AOC	H1g	Supported
D → PR	H1h	Supported
F → M	H2a	Supported
D → M	H2b	Supported
M mediate between determinants and outcomes	H3	Supported

Note: OI = Organizational identification, JS = Job satisfaction, AOC = Affective organizational commitment, PR = Psychological resilience, F = Foundation, D = Differentiators, M = Job engagement.

The results have satisfied the study objectives. First, the study aimed to investigate the determinants of job engagement in the post-pandemic in Sri Lanka. The results showed that both foundation and differentiator determinants significantly affected job engagement during this period. However, the effect between foundation and job engagement is stronger compared to the relationship between differentiators and job engagement. This result follows Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory indicating the importance of fulfilling basic employee needs relating to their basic requirements such as good work conditions and a safe work environment, company practices as well as work-related factors such as autonomy and performance feedback. On the other hand, some employees might think organizational investment in brand, leadership and performance is a waste as at the same time they must struggle to fulfil their basic requirements financially, emotionally, and morally.

Second, the study aimed to investigate the possible job engagement outcomes during the post-pandemic. Job satisfaction, affective commitment and psychological resilience were

identified as important outcomes. However, both determinants were unable to result in organizational identification as an outcome. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory states that basic needs should be fulfilled before moving into esteem needs which include prestige as well as a feeling of accomplishment. The economic crisis occurred during the post-pandemic period when the economy and society were in the recovery stage. In such a situation, resources are limited, and scarcity is higher. Therefore, moving up the hierarchy pyramid may be difficult.

Third, the study aimed to examine the mediating role of job engagement as proposed in Figure 1. The results supported the mediation hypothesis. The mediation between foundation and outcomes is higher compared to the mediation between differentiators and outcomes. During the post-pandemic, inflation was extremely high. Therefore, many employees should have faced circumstances financially, psychologically as well as emotionally. Furthermore, many organizations continue to follow work-from-home fully or partially while some come physically. During such a situation, fulfilling employees' foundation requirements such as basic needs, appropriate organizational practices, and work requirements would encourage them to continue their work effectively and successfully. This can be the reason that foundations have more contribution in determining job engagement compared to differentiators. Therefore, during such economic downfall after a life-threatening pandemic, facilitating foundation requirements such as the basic needs of employees, appropriate organizational policies, practices, and work can enhance higher job engagement.

Moreover, the study aimed to fill a gap in the existing literature by identifying possible reasons for contradictory results identified in previous studies. According to the results of the study, foundation determinants can result in positive job engagement outcomes strongly compared to differentiators. In a crisis, employees prioritize their basic needs fulfilment rather than focusing on promoting the employer brand, leadership of leaders as well as performance of the organization. If an organization focuses on such promoting activities, it would be undesirable for employees as they are under immense pressure and threat as the situation is uncertain, unclear, and inconsistent. The results showed that though other engagement outcomes have increased in the presence of engagement determinants even during the crisis, organizational identification was hindered in the presence of the determinants. This is a hindsight that shows why some studies have stated a positive impact while others reported a negative impact of such unexpected and unclear situations on job engagement. According to these findings, job engagement determinants have not created positive outcomes during the post-pandemic as they usually do. Therefore, there is a possibility of hindering some engagement outcomes in this crisis even though engagement determinants are presented, which is unlikely in the usual situation. Thus, it has created a negative impact on job engagement. This has evidenced why some studies recorded such crises positively impact job engagement while others reported that the impact is negative. On the other hand, the behaviour of the organization is also a reason for such indifferent results. When the situation in the organization is favourable for job engagement, the impact of job engagement on its employees becomes positive even though there are ongoing unclear and uncertain events outside. This may be another reason for mixed results on the impact of job engagement.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The study provided implications for organizations in enhancing employee engagement in an unexpected, unclear, inconsistent, and threatening event such as the economic crisis in Sri Lanka during the country's post-pandemic period. The results showed that organizations could enhance job engagement among their employees by facilitating their basic requirements and implementing appropriate organizational policies and practices as well as autonomy and performance feedback. The results of the study showed that facilitating factors related to differentiator determinants such as branding, leadership and performance assessment during such situations can also enhance engagement at work, but the contribution is less effective compared to foundations. The results further demonstrated that, in a crisis, organizations could enhance job satisfaction, and affect organizational commitment through job engagement by facilitating both foundation and differentiators in the organizational context. However, both determinants cannot enhance organizational identification in such a context. The findings are useful for organizations to enhance individual engagement at work and thus, achieve productivity, effectiveness, efficiency, revenue, and profit by creating job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, and psychological resilience among employees in the presence of such a crisis with the effective use of foundation and differentiator determinants.

The study has a few limitations that can affect the generalizability of the findings. The study used convenient sampling techniques for sampling the population. Due to the nature of this technique, sampling bias is a possible limitation that limits the representativeness. In addition, the study was limited to firms with more than 100 employees. Considering these study limitations, the study recommends investigating determinants and outcomes of job engagement in a much larger sample. In addition, future studies could further examine the organizational identification variable.

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