

**Conceptualizing Employee Engagement in China:
“It’s A State of Fit”**

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Executive Summary

The current public relations scholarship on engagement, particularly employee engagement, is inconsistent, overly quantitative, and U.S.-centered. A disengaged workforce costs American businesses up to \$550 billion each year (Bolden-Barrett, 2017). Our study sought to advance theory and practice on employee engagement from a global and qualitative perspective, by examining narratives of employees working for both local and global public relations agencies in China via 24 in-depth interviews.

Our main findings revealed a three-dimensional conceptualization of employee engagement (see Figure 1): engagement with work, employing organization, and people. The enactment process of employee engagement begins with their strong sense of job responsibility and work ethic, taking ownership and initiatives, and finding meaning, joy, and fulfillment in job tasks. Simultaneously, engaged employees also identify with their employing organizations' culture, vision, mission, and values, actively participate in organizational activities, and feel a sense of belonging and mutual benefit. Lastly, an element of emotional bonding and interpersonal work relationships constitutes employee engagement. Cultural nuances regarding job engagement, the "happy marriage" metaphor, and engagement with people are also discussed. Our study contributed to theorizing of employee engagement in a non-Western context and presented cultural nuances of Chinese public relations employees' perspectives.

Introduction

Public relations has matured as a field, with exponential growth in research in the past decade, as shown in a latest bibliometric analysis of all published articles from 2010 to 2015 in six major journals (Ki, Pasadeos, & Ertem-Eray, 2019). The quantity of citations in the field experienced a threefold increase (Ki et al., 2019). One important concept that has given rise to burgeoning interests from both practitioners and scholars in public relations and related disciplines is engagement (Morehouse & Saffer, 2020; Ng et al., 2020; Rodgers & Thorson, 2018), in forms of consumer engagement in marketing (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013; Ng et al., 2020), social media/digital engagement in public relations and advertising (e.g., Brian et al., 2019; Rodgers & Thorson, 2018), dialogic engagement (e.g., Taylor & Kent, 2014), alumni engagement (Shen & Sha, 2020), and employee engagement (e.g., Eldor, 2016; Ewing et al., 2019; Shen & Jiang, 2019). Among them, of special interest to our study was employee engagement, a lack of which could cost American businesses up to \$550 billion each year (Bolden-Barrett, 2017).

The concept of employee engagement is of exceeding significance to internal communication practitioners as we enter the third year of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Nearly one-third of surveyed employees across Asia experienced economic hardship and reported daily experience of worry, sadness, and anger in a Gallup State of the Global Workplace Report in 2021 (Singh, 2021) while businesses in the U.S. were scrambling to deal with the "Great Resignation" during which record number of employees quit their jobs (Humbad, 2022). Remote working may become a new norm for companies even after the pandemic (McKinsey.com, 2021). Relatedly, public relations practitioners in different countries have previously rated employee engagement in their workplace a top issue affecting their own daily

work (Meng et al., 2013; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2012). These new and fluid realities inevitably underscore the need for a global perspective on employee engagement.

Nonetheless, the conceptualizations and operationalizations of the concept employee engagement have differed widely across studies in public relations, most of which are quantitative (Lemon, 2019; Shen & Jiang, 2019). Therefore, our study aimed to advance theorizing on employee engagement in public relations by exploring its conceptual meanings through qualitative interviews with public relations practitioners as they narrated their own organizational experiences. Furthermore, research on engagement has been largely conducted by authors affiliated with universities in Western countries (86.6%, including 45.8% in the U.S.), with a context focusing on the U.S. (32.2%), Australia (10.2%), and U.K. (5.1%), according to a recent content analysis of journal articles on public/stakeholder engagement from 2006 to 2015 (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017). In our study, we focused on the unique stakeholders of Chinese public relations practitioners as employees because they not only offer counsel to organizational clients but also have unique knowledge and insights about internal and external audiences. Their own employee engagement experiences and perspectives in public relations agencies would present some clarity to the concept of employee engagement in a non-Western context. Hence, guided by in-depth interview data, we sought to bring to light the lived experiences and narratives of employees working for both local and global public relations agencies in China (N = 24), building a theoretical foundation for understanding the concept and nature of employee engagement from a global perspective.

Literature Review

Employee Engagement: A Brief State of Research

Employee engagement was first introduced as a desirable state or condition by organizational behavior scholar Kahn (1990). The majority of research on employee engagement in public relations to date has adopted Kahn's (1990) notion of work role performance or Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) and Saks' (2006) conceptualization of a psychological work state (e.g., Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018; Karanges et al., 2015; Shen & Jiang, 2019; Tkalac Verčič & Vokic, 2017; Men, 2012; Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017; Welch, 2011). For example, integrating the theories of relationship management and social exchange, Shen and Jiang (2019) employed Kahn's (1990) definition and conceptualized employee engagement as "the enactment and presentation of employees' selves at work; such expressions manifest in physical, cognitive, and emotional forms" (p. 34). Welch (2011) followed Saks' (2006) view of employee engagement comprising both job and organizational engagement, defining it as "a dynamic, changeable psychological state which links employees to their organisations" (p. 341).

The above body of scholarship in public relations on employee engagement often takes an instrumental perspective and centers on *job engagement* (cf. Jelen-Sanchez, 2017), relying on quantitative measures from the organizational behavior scholarship, either Kahn's (1990) or Schaufeli's (2012) Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) or a combination of similar instruments, such as Saks (2006) and Kang (2010). For example, Walden et al. (2017) considered employee engagement a psychological state and focused on *job engagement* or employees' immersion and connection to their job tasks. They measured job engagement with a short version of the UWES (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), reporting via online survey data that job engagement acted as a mediator between three employee communication predictor variables, i.e., information flow, adequacy, and interaction supportiveness, and organizational commitment as an outcome.

Few employee engagement studies (e.g., Lemon, 2019; Lemon & Macklin, 2020; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018) have taken a qualitative approach to explore the holistic organizational experiences of employees. One such exception was Lemon (2019). Lemon (2019) problematized the current employee engagement scholarship as being functionalistic and commonly treating employees as "a resource to be managed to meet organizational goals" (p. 179). Using a co-creational perspective and data from 32 interviews, she presented dialogue, active listening, face-to-face communication, and other forms and tools of internal communication as contributing factors for employees' meaning-making process of their engagement at work. In like manner, Lemon and Palenchar (2018) employed the rhetorical approach of zones of meaning and shared employees' lived engagement experiences as occurring in non-job tasks as well as going above and beyond required job duties (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). These qualitative studies pointed to a broader view of employee engagement that involves not only employees' job role enactment but also their connections with organizational mission and emotional connections with coworkers. Organizational internal communication and dialogue can enable such employee engagement.

The preceding brief review of literature on employee engagement reveals inconsistency both conceptually and operationally. It is unclear if employee engagement comprises employees' full spectrum of organizational experience or is limited to one's work role or task performance. Also, quantitative studies on employee engagement conceptualized the concept as multi-

dimensional, including physical (vigor), emotional (dedication), and cognitive (absorption), which involved only employees' job tasks. One qualitative study similarly suggested employee engagement as six zones of meaning working in tandem (Lemon & Palenchar, 2018), as opposed to the aforementioned three quantitative dimensions. Considering these inconsistencies, our study sought to provide more clarity and identify the nuances underpinning the concept of employee engagement from a qualitative angle. In the following section, we further problematize the current scholarship on employee engagement for its ethnocentricity and argue for the need for explication in a non-Western context.

Explicating Employee Engagement in a Non-Western Context

The theme of ethnocentricity emerged as we synthesized past literature in public relations on different forms of engagement, revealing “a strong domination of U.S. scholars and perspectives” from both author affiliations and geographic contexts of articles (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017, p. 939). Understandably only a handful of studies in public relations have examined or simply touched upon employee engagement in China (e.g., Men & Hung-Baesecke, 2015; Meng et al., 2013). For example, in an exploratory study of top three critical social issues in the Greater China area — mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, Meng et al. (2013) reported from online survey data that local public relations practitioners (N = 132) viewed “how to improve employee engagement and commitment in the workplace” a top issue affecting their daily work (p. 598). Without defining employee engagement, Meng et al. (2013) briefly shared a few organizational initiatives conducive to fostering employee engagement and commitment, ranging from “a positive communication climate” to training for front-line supervisors to improve listening and communication skills, and direct access to senior leaders (p. 599). In one of the first empirical studies investigating employee engagement in China, Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) followed the conventional Western view of employee engagement as a positive psychological state, comprising affectivity and empowerment. Affectivity is “characterized by attention, absorption, dedication, participation, vigor, enthusiasm, excitement, and pride” whereas empowerment denotes “employees' sense of competence/self-efficacy, control, autonomy, meaningfulness, and impact” (p. 453). Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) pooled survey measures for employee engagement from Saks (2006) and Kang (2010) and focused on antecedents to employee engagement, including internal communication channels, organizational authenticity, and transparency. Nevertheless, what constitutes employee engagement from local Chinese practitioners' view remains unclear.

To build our understanding of the construct of employee engagement from a non-Western perspective, we feel it necessary to provide a brief overview of the landscape of public relations practice in China. China's first generation of modern public relations companies began in the 1980s, since which global firms, such as Hill & Knowlton and Burson-Marsteller, entered the Chinese market (Guo, 2012; Hu, Huang, & D. Zhang, 2015). China International Public Relations Associations (CIPRA) was then founded in 1991 to promote “professionalization, specialization, and standardization of China PR industry” (CIPRA.org.cn, 2014). National certification exams began as a requirement for public relations practitioners in 2000 (Hu et al., 2015). With a fast-growing economy, the public relations industry saw booming growth in the next few decades. For example, as of 2020, the public relations market value in China surpassed 62.7 billion yuan or 9.69 billion U.S. dollars (Statista.com, 2020). In 2003, local public relations companies outperformed their global counterparts in China for the first time (Guo, 2012). In 2019, the latest ranking of top 30 public relations companies consisted of mostly local ones,

primarily servicing automobile, telecommunications, Internet, consumer goods, and manufacturing industries (CIPRA.org.cn, 2020a). Employee relations was ranked last in terms of market growth potential for these companies. These top-ranking firms boasted a promising 6.5% annual growth, higher than China's national GDP growth rate of 6.1% in 2019. Female employees at these top 30 public relations firms were a majority (60.8%). A typical employee in these firms was aged 30 and worked 44 hours per week on average, with a three-year tenure (CIPRA.org.cn, 2020b). Practitioners in public relations firms work at the forefront of the industry and have a unique understanding of external and internal stakeholders. Given that public relations firms also offer employee engagement counsel to their clients, the narrated employee engagement experiences of Chinese public relations practitioners may shed light for scholarly research on this important concept.

In light of the above review of literature, a qualitative approach would benefit public relations scholarship on employee engagement and offer us a more nuanced and localized understanding of the concept by exploring views of practitioners working in public relations firms in China. Therefore, we proposed the following research question:

RQ: How do Chinese public relations practitioners perceive the concept of employee engagement?

Method

This study used in-depth interviews (N = 24) to explore how Chinese public relations practitioners in agency settings perceive their experiences of employee engagement. The primary benefit of the method is to develop in-depth, rather than broad, data for analysis (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2008). Another strength of in-depth interviews is the opportunity for researchers to explore individual perspectives while uncovering overall themes (Hammersley & Atkison, 1995). Because of COVID-19 safety restrictions, the lead researcher conducted all the telephone interviews via direct phone calls or audio interviews via WeChat voice calls, a dominant social media mobile app in China. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), participants may feel freer in their responses in telephone/audio interviews, allowing telephone and voice calls to be an invaluable data-gathering tool. Standard institutional review board (IRB) procedures were followed for data collection.

Participant Profile and Recruitment

Both purposive sampling and convenience sampling approach were used to guide researchers in identifying participants for this study. Having worked at public relations firms in China, the lead researcher reached out to his personal connections with both agency and in-house jobs, sending them invitations to participate in our study. He also asked these connections to recommend current and former colleagues or friends as potential participants.

To ensure representation of a wide range of public relations firms, the researchers recruited participants from both local firms and global ones. Local firms are independent public relations companies that were founded and run in mainland China only whereas global ones are headquartered globally with offices in major cities in China. At each firm, we recruited one entry-level employee, one middle-level employee, and a senior management employee respectively. Entry-level employees have less than three years of experience at the ranks of account coordinators or associates, while middle-level employees have over three years of experience, serving a middle-management role such as consultant, client manager, or senior manager. Senior management employees are seasoned public relations practitioners who run a

firm or one office of the firm. When senior management participants were not available, we recruited senior employees who ran a practice group at the firm with the job title as director or above.

Table 1 offers a description of participants and includes ID numbers, gender, position, location, years in public relations industry, years with the company and firm type. In total, the study had 24 public relations practitioners including 12 men and 12 women from four local public relations firms and four global ones. Participant names and firm names are not used in the results section to ensure confidentiality. Instead, participants are referenced based on their ID numbers, which are included in Table 1 [See Table in Appendices].

Data Collection Procedure

All interview documents, including consent forms and interview questions were first drafted in English, translated into Chinese, and back translated into English to ensure accuracy. Both researchers of this study are fluent in English and Chinese and deliberated on wordings used in the documents. The lead researcher conducted all interviews in Chinese. To avoid confusion, he used in the interviews both English and Chinese for the key concept *employee engagement* (translated into *yuangong jingyedu* in Chinese). All participants in this study have varying levels of fluency in English. Before asking interview questions, the lead researcher double checked with each participant that they understood the English term *employee engagement* and its Chinese translation.

Prior to data collection, participants were asked to read an IRB-approved informed consent form before proceeding. Given that most participants were working at home due to the pandemic and had no access to printers, they provided consent via WeChat messaging. All interviewees participated in this study voluntarily. They did not receive incentives for their participation. The lead researcher began the interviews with an additional verbal confirmation for digital audio recording. After the interviews, digital recordings were then uploaded to a password-protected computer. Only one participant did not want to be audio recorded. The lead researcher took notes during the interview.

The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, on average lasting 50-70 minutes. The lead researcher started the interviews with a social conversation to build rapport with the participants. After ice-breaking conversations, the lead researcher encouraged participants to define *employee engagement* based on their understanding. Then follow-up questions asked participants to further elaborate what constitutes *an engaged employee* from their own experiences and stories. They were encouraged to share thoughts and anecdotes using their own life and work experiences. Please see the interview guide in Appendix.

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis was every participant's response to each question, which provided important contextual information to derive meaning from the data. After each interview, the lead researcher transcribed the audio recording into a transcription document in Chinese. Both researchers reviewed the documents preliminarily after each interview and concluded data collection when data saturation was reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Data analysis was performed inductively on all interview transcripts afterwards. The researchers individually studied these documents to identify themes across the interviews, as well as specific episodes and anecdotes. The researchers first used open coding, manually going through the interview texts line by line to identify salient concepts and themes (Charmaz, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The researchers then met on Zoom multiple times to compare their

coded themes and discuss some uncertain themes. The open coding process generated 55 unique codes relevant to the research questions. This process of separate coding and rounds of comparisons and discussions helped reduce coder bias.

Axial coding was then applied to create categories. The researchers collapsed the repetitive codes and paired related codes together, which resulted in 20 codes. The 20 codes were then grouped into several subcategories. At the final stage, commonalities and differences in the properties of the subcategories were further discussed until researchers reached an agreement in three major categories. An integrated framework was finally formulated.

To mitigate translation bias, the researchers coded the data from Chinese transcripts directly. After themes were finalized in Chinese, the researchers discussed the proper English translations of corresponding Chinese themes. When participants' quotes were selected for reporting, the researchers deliberated on and completed the English translation process.

Results

Three big emergent themes of employee engagement include the following: (1) engagement with work, (2) engagement with the organization, and (3) engagement with people. Under each theme subthemes are also identified. Each theme and subthemes are fully discussed and supported by participant quotes.

It should be noted that participants did not clearly distinguish those themes from each other in their interview narratives. Some themes are intertwined or combined in their responses. For example, a senior employee at a local firm (ID 20) saw employee engagement as “a state of organization-employee fit and mutual integration” that consists of engagement with work, employing organization and people. Specifically, engaged employees are willing to do their assigned job tasks and their personal values match organizational values. They see their company as “a big family, with employees being included in the family and welcomed by other family members.”

We discuss the major themes in greater details in the following sections.

Engagement with Work

One dominant theme of employee engagement is work-related engagement, revealing employees' psychological state concerning their work tasks. Nearly all participants mentioned engagement in the workplace, under which three sub-themes were identified – job engagement, job ownership and job fulfillment. According to the participants, engaged employees go above and beyond their assigned tasks. They take strong ownership in their jobs and consider work part of their identity. And they find meaning and fulfillment at work.

Job Engagement. Most participants, particularly practitioners from local public relations firms, believed employee engagement is about job engagement in the first place. According to the participants, engaged employees have a strong sense of job responsibility and work ethic. Job means more than a source of income and is not bound by the normal working hours, which presents a glimpse into the mindset of a normalized 996 work culture in China (Schlitz, 2021). The notorious 996 work culture refers to employees working a 9 a.m.-9 p.m. daily schedule for six days a week. A junior practitioner at a local public relations firm (ID 1) evaluated himself/herself as highly engaged because 5 a.m. was a normal start time for his/her work days and he/she still happily responded to text messages from their boss at 2 a.m. about a project after

a 16-hour-long work day. The participant felt that engaged employees always complete their job tasks, even working over time.

A managerial practitioner at a global firm (ID 22) similarly stressed the importance of job responsibility from his own leadership point of view:

Employee engagement for myself is full responsibility, which is no brainer. I must work hard and lead by example because everyone is watching. If I don't work, everyone will leave... Basically I come to the office earlier than everyone else. This is not a job simply for a paycheck. I have to take responsibility and set an example for the two or three hundred colleagues. If you can't do well yourself, how can you expect your subordinates to do well?

Engaged employees work hard and do their own job well. They are proactive at work, responsive in project/client communication and most effective at execution. A managerial employee at a local public relations firm (ID 18) described an ideal engaged employee at work:

The person does not need any push during the work process. Being very proactive in thinking, he or she is not satisfied with just completing the assigned tasks. Instead, the person always does one thing extra or thinks one more step. They take initiatives to think about how to do the job better and suggest different ideas to the client, to the team, to the supervisor or management.

Some participants also considered team engagement as one component of job engagement. A middle-level public relations practitioner at a local firm (ID 9) stated, "Employee engagement is also team engagement. You must be a good team member, showing a positive attitude and playing a very active role in the team."

Job Ownership. The majority of participants, mostly practitioners from local public relations firms, discussed job ownership as a component of employee work engagement. Engaged employees take ownership of their work by thinking from the management or company's perspective, which was a prominent view among middle-level and managerial participants at local public relations firms. A middle-level practitioner at a local public relations firm (ID 12) shared his understanding of the concept:

I understand employee engagement from three aspects: short-term, mid-term and long-term. Short-term engagement is to do the job well. Mid-term engagement is to think more from the company's perspective when it comes to expense saving. In the long run, engaged employees should strategically look at work from the company's long-term growth, which might be overlooked by junior employees.

A managerial participant from another local public relations firm (ID 17) echoed, "Engaged employees are able to shift gears and put themselves in their boss's shoes. They are able to consider issues at work from the company's perspective."

Interestingly, a few participants went beyond the typical definition of job ownership, which usually means that an employee takes the initiative to bring about positive results and understands the purpose of their job duties in achieving organizational goals. According to these participants, job ownership means that engaged employees consider work part of their identity or view the company as their home. They put personal interests second and are willing to sacrifice for the company, which reflects a collectivist culture still common in Chinese society. This work-as-a-calling mentality embodies the traditional Chinese cultural values centering on family and society as opposed to individuals (C. Zhang et al., 2015). For example, a junior practitioner at a global public relations firm (ID 8) responded:

[E]ngaged employees do not care much about personal gains or loss at work. They do not divide their work hours and off-hours so clearly, and they do not care much about who did more and who did less. They regard their job as part of their lives.

Job Fulfillment. Some participants, particularly the senior and managerial practitioners, believed employees are better engaged when they find interest, reward, meaning or fulfillment in their job tasks. A senior employee at a local public relations firm (ID 19) stated:

Our firm specializes in healthcare. From my point of view, I am fully invested in the health public relations industry and take a strong interest in our field. So I am dedicated to my work. This is my understanding of employee engagement.

Job fulfillment could be an earned positive feeling that job tasks interest employees and contribute to employee learning. Employees take joy in job tasks, create meaningful work, and receive positive feedback. A managerial participant at a global public relations firm (ID 23) explained that the satisfaction of his own accomplishment needs mattered most, adding, “I feel that my capabilities and interests have been brought into full play at the current position, which is also recognized and appreciated by my company. I feel pretty good about it.”

Engagement with the Employing Organization

Engagement with the employing organization is another key emergent theme of employee engagement. Many participants, particularly practitioners at global public relations firms considered engagement with the employing organization a critical component of employee engagement. According to the participants, engaged employees enjoy a good fit with the employing organization with the metaphor of a happy marriage or family, identifying with organizational culture, values, vision, and mission by participating in various organizational activities and initiatives. Many participants regarded such engagement as a mutually beneficial and win-win relationship.

Identification with the Organization and A Sense of Belonging.

Integration and *Identification* were two words frequently used when participants conceptualized employee engagement with the employing organization. Employees experience a good fit at the organization and identify themselves with the organization’s culture, value and vision, which leads to psychological connection, acceptance and integration with the organization. It sometimes triggers loyalty and a sense of pride in the organization. “I think employee engagement is the integration between the employee and the organization, and it contains three levels,” explained a middle-level practitioner at a global public relations firm (ID 14). He further elaborated:

The first level is a sense of fit – a good fit with company’s working environment, having good health and good mood at work; the second level is embracing company culture, vision, and mission and believing the company will help and support my career growth; the third level is a step further – a sense of involvement and belonging. I feel that this is the company I am willing to work for and grow together with.

Some participants regarded a sense of belonging a key part of engagement with their employing organization, with a few using the metaphor of a happy marriage or family to characterize their engagement, which is hardly found in the Western literature of employee engagement. According to a senior practitioner at a local public relations firm (ID 17), “Engaged employees have a psychological dependence on their organization. They take the company as their own family.” Another managerial practitioner at a global public relations firm (ID 23) discussed his feelings towards his company, “It’s like a marriage, a very happy marriage.” This

view is deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese collectivist values of prioritizing nation, society, and family over individuals (C. Zhang et al., 2015). Many organizations operating in China strive to develop a family-like organizational culture, such as Starbucks crediting its 2018 Aon Best Employers' Award to the company's unique "localized family culture" (Starbucks.com.cn, 2018).

Participation and Involvement. One manifestation of engaging with the organization is employees' proactive participation and involvement in various organizational activities and initiatives, including organizational annual meetings, team-building, and non-work related organizational events. Such events could foster employees' sense of pride and identification in their organizations and subsequently employee engagement. A senior-level practitioner at a global public relations firm (ID 24) shared that he looked forward to working "when my company arranged many interesting events...or team-building activities." Similarly, a junior-level practitioner at a global public relations agency (ID 6) stated that his/her engagement and sense of pride were enhanced by their company's internal communication and events arranged by the human resources department and workers union. But another middle-level practitioner (ID 14) at a global public relations firm added a cautionary note to such involvement, sharing that his/her participation in non-work activities could lessen when workload and stress are high, unless such activities are career-enhancing.

Mutually Beneficial Relationship. For many participants, employee engagement is two-way and mutually beneficial, reflecting a win-win relationship and resembling elements of the relationship management theory in an internal public relations context (cf. Ledingham, 2003). Organizations can grow bigger and better because of contributions from engaged employees and employees see a future for their careers. Organizations need to invest in employees and provide them a platform to "learn and grow," remarked a junior employee at a global firm (ID 6), "It's a relationship in which both parties advance side by side." Gestures such as "daily check-ins or personalized two-way communication" helped another junior employee at a global firm (ID7) become more engaged and committed for the long haul.

Engagement with People

In addition to engagement with work and employing organizations, interpersonal relationships emerged as a distinct theme of employee engagement. Many participants considered engagement with people (peers and leaders) as a form of employee engagement, which highlighted the interpersonal relationship building concept of "*guanxi*" in Chinese culture. A middle-level employee in a global public relations firm (ID 15) referred to this aspect of engagement as "emotional bonding with colleagues, such as chatting like friends and eating out together." Participants, particularly junior employees in both local and global firms, regarded "warm interpersonal relationships" and emotional connections in the workplace an important indicator of employee engagement. A junior employee at a local public relations firm (ID 4) attributed his/her engagement to the "pleasant and laid-back working environment" at their small agency, characterized by "relaxed communication with management" and "warm interpersonal relationships." Another entry-level employee at a global firm (ID 8) further explained why interpersonal relationships with peers is important to his/her engagement, "[I]t is difficult for me to get access to senior management. Every day I just interact with my colleagues. Almost 80 to 90 percent of my engagement with the company comes from my engagement with coworkers."

A management practitioner at a global firm (ID 23) also confirmed that emotional bonding is a more important component of employee engagement for younger employees, "[T]he

younger generation born in the 1990s is different from those born in the 1970s and 1980s. Their need for affinity exceeds their need for work and money...[T]hey pursue happiness and pleasant interpersonal relationships at work.”

Discussion

Through narratives and stories from 24 practitioners working for local and global public relations firms in China, our study sheds light on the complexities and nuances of employee engagement and expands its conceptualization in a global context. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications herein.

A Multi-Layered Conceptual Map: A State of Fit

Our findings of a multi-dimensional conceptualization for employee engagement (see Figure 1) illustrate some key conceptual points to broaden current views of employee engagement in public relations, adding to the small body of qualitative literature on employee engagement (e.g., Lemon, 2019; Lemon & Macklin, 2020; Lemon & Palenchar, 2018). The conceptual figure highlights our main discovery that the foundation of employee engagement as a state of fit lies in employees’ responsibility for, dedication to, and fulfillment in job tasks. Engaged workers enjoy their job and derive a sense of accomplishment from and find meaning in what they do on a daily basis. As such, engaged public relations practitioners naturally view their job as part of who they are and take ownership and initiatives at work. In other words, engaged employees love what they do and excel at it. Job is not a paycheck, but becomes a big part of one’s identity.

Layered on the foundation are the dimensions of employees’ adaptation to organizational life through identification, participation, and win-win mutual growth as well as their fit in the webs of interpersonal work relationships. Engaged workers identify with the organization’s culture, vision, mission, and values, actively participate in organizational activities, and feel a sense of belonging and mutual benefit. Their workplace resembles family and home. Their emotional bonding at work may span multiple levels, from one’s work teammates and supervisors to higher-level management.

The three dimensions work in tandem to form employees’ overall experience of engagement within an organization as they seek to *fit* in their job, to their organizations, and with coworkers and superiors. The complexities in the dynamic workings of the three dimensions challenge the popular view in public relations literature of a psychological state or work role expression, echoing a recent critique of past literature being restrictive (Lemon, 2019). Limiting our conceptualization of employee engagement to merely work role enactment or a psychological state (e.g., Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018; Karanges et al., 2015; Shen & Jiang, 2019; Tkalac Verčič & Vokic, 2017; Men, 2012; Men & Hung-Baesecke, 2015; Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017; Welch, 2011) could prevent a deeper grasp of the construct and further inquiry into added values of employee engagement to organizations (e.g., effectiveness and innovation), employees’ personal life (e.g., self-esteem and well-being), and the community at large (e.g., community involvement and social engagement) (Eldor, 2016). Our study suggests that employee engagement as a matter of fit materialized in three dimensions could encompass employees’ psychological state for their job, attitudes towards their organization, and perceptions of their work relationships. Further scholarly discussions on what underpins employee engagement will greatly enrich this body of knowledge.

Furthermore, our participants mostly envisioned employee engagement as positive and desirable (e.g., Jelen-Sanchez, 2017; Schaufeli, 2017; Shen & Jiang, 2019). Some caveats are worth noting. When working exceedingly long hours and sacrificing self interests for one's company are normalized and promoted in the name of job engagement and job ownership, employees' physical health and mental well-being may be jeopardized. Also, participation and involvement presume that such activities benefit but not burden employees. Lastly, emotional bonding and close work relationships may muddle work-life boundaries. A delicate balance of these different aspects is needed as organizations consider engagement initiatives and employees navigate their organizational lives.

A Global Perspective: Cultural Nuances

The most recent citation study of works on global public relations from 1983 to 2019 called for more indigenous theorizing as nearly all of the studies analyzed were based on theories or perspectives originated in the U.S., although the U.S. only accounts for a quarter of global public relations practice (Ki, Pasadeos, & Ertem-Eray, 2021). Our research using a qualitative approach has helped capture nuanced narratives and individual experiences in a non-Western context, contributing to global theory development in employee engagement. We present an updated broader conceptualization of employee engagement that reflects perspectives of practitioners of different ranks working in local and global public relations firms in China. We discuss the culture nuances identified in our study herein.

First, the unique view of job ownership emerged in our study underscores individual sacrifice in the workplace by downplaying the contractual employment relationship between the company and its employees. The "happy marriage" metaphor is also a unique theme in the Chinese context. These findings potentially reflect a broad cultural difference in individualism vs. collectivism in Asian company cultures (e.g., Yeo & Pang, 2017) as well as interdependent vs. independent self-construal in individual cultural value orientations (e.g., Gudykunst et al., 1996). Asians' notion of *self* is composed of both their individual images and group consciousness as opposed to the dominant individualistic orientation among Westerners (Servaes, 2016). In the Chinese context, one's job has been traditionally deemed as a calling. The specific meanings of such a calling have evolved from serving one's families and the emperors in feudal societies, to serving the Chinese Communist Party and the nation in the 1960s and 1970s, and to a sense of duty to collective expectations from one's family (i.e., *xiao* or filial piety) and society (C. Zhang et al., 2015). For example, S. Zhou et al. (2012) shared a couple of popular slogans from the Chairman Mao's era: "I'm a brick, I could be moved to any place where I am needed," and "The need of the nation is also the need of mine" (p. 409). In light of recent public outrage on the brutal 996 work culture in China (Schlitz, 2021), potential dark sides of this view of job engagement and ownership and "happy marriage" are noteworthy. Organizations and employees that normalize the 996 work culture may confuse exploitation with engagement and give rise to unnecessary pressure to employees who think otherwise.

In addition, participants, particularly junior employees, regarded emotional bonding in the workplace as an important indicator of employee engagement. Two reasons may have contributed to this phenomenon. First, one may argue that this aspect of engagement is generation-specific, particularly because many younger employees in their 20s or early 30s who are the only child in their families due to China's one-child policy desire more emotional bonding with peers. While this generation prefers "individual choice, enjoyment, and experience" and embraces more diverse lifestyles, including celibacy and "dual income, no kids"

(DINK), they find it harder to develop close relationships in their wide social networks (Y. Zhou, 2020, p. 50).

Second, colleagues' emotional-bonding activities such as chatting like friends, eating out, and singing karaoke after work are not uncommon in China and other East Asian countries. *Guanxi* is also central in Chinese social life (Servaes, 2016; A. Zhang et al., 2009). As A. Zhang et al. (2009) explained, *guan* means "be[ing] clear about who his or her connections are" (p. 229) and *xi* describes the delicate and exclusive fashion one needs to maintain their connections. The process of *guanxi* also requires people to genuinely treat their connections as ends not means to an end. The authentic *guanxi* that employees develop at work is an important element of their social life that runs much more deeply than common misperceptions of *guanxi* as gift giving or other unethical public relations practices.

The dimension of engagement with people echoes one of the six zones of meanings posited by Lemon and Palenchar's (2018), namely "building connections" (p. 150). It also presents a fresh look at employee-organization relationships from employee publics' own point of view. The current literature of employee-organization relationships usually investigates employees' perceptions of their levels of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality towards employing organizations (Hon & Grunig, 1999) but neglects to examine employees' interpersonal relationships with peers and leaders. Future research may further explore this dimension to find out if interpersonal relationships and emotional bonding constitute employee engagement in a Western context or if they are culture specific. Relatedly, further examination of how social meanings of employee engagement are co-created and recreated will help us better comprehend the cultural contexts of the construct (cf. Gaither & Curtin, 2008). As scholars contextualize different engagement experience narratives in a global setting, theoretical discoveries will help us develop a richer and fuller understanding of the nature and elements of employee engagement. Global organizations operating in China could take note of these cultural nuances as they develop programs to better engage with local Chinese employees.

Limitations

This study is limited in a few ways. First, our study only approached employee engagement from a Chinese context. We encourage more studies to provide an intercultural look into unique culture- and country-specific meanings of employee engagement, if any, to advance global public relations scholarship. Relatedly, we invite additional investigation of the nature of employee engagement using a variety of methods, including phenomenological, critical, rhetorical, postmodern, and ethnographic methods, from perspectives and voices of employees, as opposed to a management and organizational focus (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017).

Conclusion

This study explored the meanings and components of employee engagement in a global context, proposing employee engagement as a level of fit between an employee and their organizations, professionally, organizationally, and interpersonally. Using perspectives of Chinese public relations practitioners, we identified cultural nuances to further enrich theorizing and practice on employee engagement.

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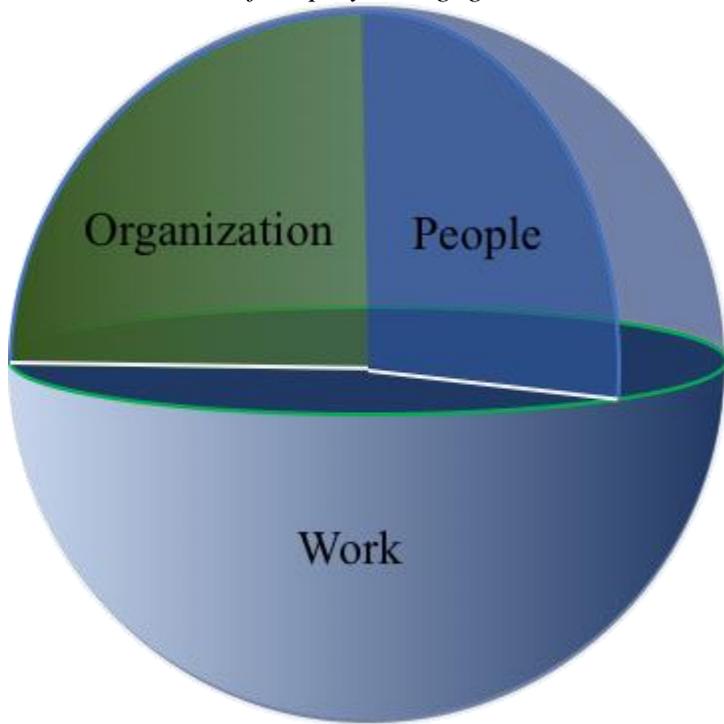
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Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

ID #	Sex	Age	Position	Location	Years in Industry	Years with Company	Firm Type
ID 1	M	28	Associate/Graphic Designer	Beijing	2 years	1 year	Local
ID 2	F	25	Senior Associate	Beijing	1.5 years	1.5 years	Local
ID 3	M	25	Planning Specialist	Shanghai	2.5 years	2.5 years	Local
ID 4	F	27	Media Specialist	Beijing	3 years	2 years	Local
ID 5	F	24	Account Coordinator	Beijing	1.5 years	1 year	Global
ID 6	F	26	Account Coordinator	Beijing	1.5 years	6 months	Global
ID 7	F	28	Account Coordinator	Beijing	1 year	7 months	Global
ID 8	M	27	Associate	Beijing	1.5 years	1.5 years	Global
ID 9	F	30	Client Manager	Beijing	3 years	1.5 years	Local
ID 10	M	28	Consultant	Beijing	3 years	3 years	Local
ID 11	F	47	Account & Media Manager	Nanning	7 years	7 years	Local
ID 12	M	26	Account Manager	Beijing	3 years	3 years	Local
ID 13	M	27	Senior Account Executive	Beijing	3 years	2 years	Global
ID 14	F	32	Account Manager	Beijing	10 years	3 years	Global
ID 15	M	29	Account Manager	Beijing	6 years	1.5 years	Global
ID 16	M	30	Senior Manager	Beijing	8 years	6 months	Global
ID 17	M	50	General Manager	Beijing	21 years	16 years	Local
ID 18	F	32	Executive Director	Beijing	10 years	2 years	Local
ID 19	F	43	Founder and CEO	Beijing	12 years	10 years	Local
ID 20	F	40	Business Director	Beijing	18 years	4 years	Local
ID 21	F	37	Account Director	Beijing	10 years	2 years	Global
ID 22	M	50	President	Beijing	28 years	4 years	Global
ID 23	M	37	General Manager	Beijing	15 years	2 years	Global
ID 24	M	37	Senior Vice President	Beijing	13 years	13 years	Global

Figure 1
3-D Presentation of Employee Engagement Dimensions



Appendix: Interview Guide (Semi-Structured)

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
 - Follow-up: Your age? How long have you worked in PR and in your company? What is your position? Which area and what type of clients do you serve?
2. How do you define “employee engagement” in your agency? In other words, what is your definition of “employee engagement”?
 - Follow-up question: Do you have any knowledge of your agency’s policy regarding employee engagement? What is it?
3. Do you consider yourself engaged at work? (Or alternatively, ask: Do you look forward to going to work every day?)
 - Probes: If so/not, why or why not? If yes, any specific anecdotes?
4. What does an “engaged PR practitioner” look like?
5. How important is employee engagement in your agency? Do you personally feel it’s important? Why/why not?
6. Anything you would like to add?