Individual, job, and organizational dimensions of work engagement: evidence from the tourism industry

Abstract

Purpose: This qualitative study investigates how employees and managers perceive work engagement and the role of intangible factors (e.g., task variety, support, and clarity) involved in the motivational process of engagement.

Design: A sample of employees working in four organizations in the tourism industry were interviewed. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the results.

Findings: The results reveal that several intangible and contextual factors (e.g., challenging and varied tasks, good relationships at work, and inspiring leaders) are more relevant to work engagement than extrinsic motivators. Engaged individuals are positive, show a personal attachment to their work roles and colleagues, and have a cognitive aspect derived from their effort.

Originality: An integrated model of work engagement-disengagement underpinned by factors at the individual, job, and organizational level is suggested as a synthesis of the main research results and can serve as a solid foundation for creating better future workplaces. This study contributes to the understanding of employee behaviors and organizations at work by discussing and empirically exploring the role of work engagement as a driver of differentiation among companies in the tourism industry in Galicia (Spanish region).

Keywords: work engagement; intangible factors; thematic analysis; tourism.

1 Introduction

Since 2000, organizations in the tourism industry have been facing structural changes to adapt their human resource strategies to new market conditions (Baum, 2018). In

particular, digitalization has revolutionized the hospitality industry, imposing great economic challenges and transforming the job market and the way of doing business (Dredge *et al.*, 2019). These changes influence individuals' work experiences and have important implications for how people and organizations are managed and the way people plan their trips. In this sense, employee engagement could result in organizations becoming more competitive in the face of severe economic downturns or even new scenarios caused by continuous change (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2020). Previous literature on work engagement and employee well-being provides evidence of the value of work engagement as a driver of differentiation in times of crisis (Sarwar *et al.*, 2020) and employee personal resources such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and optimism may enhance work engagement (Paek *et al.*, 2015). However, there is still a research gap in the study of the role of intangible factors at the individual, job, and organizational levels on employee work engagement.

Attraction and retention of high-quality employees are some of the challenges that organizations in the tourism industry are facing to gain a competitive advantage. The tourism industry is more precarious than other service industries as it is characterized by long working hours, low salaries, and demanding customer service (Kusluvan *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, engagement becomes especially important because the quality of the service is highly dependent on both the behaviors and characteristics of the people providing it.

The study of work engagement has burgeoned over the past 20 years because of its numerous advantages for organizations, such as task performance, increased customer satisfaction, and positive employee outcomes (Halbesleben, 2010; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010). Work engagement has been defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of

mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002, p. 74).

The extant literature falls short of exploring the employee's perception of their engagement (Shuck *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, this qualitative study seeks to fill this gap in the literature and aims to elucidate the process through which engagement is achieved and enrich current theories by investigating, from employees' and managers' perspectives, which intangible factors influence work engagement (research question 1), how individuals perceive it (research question 2), and clarifying the contextual factors that underlie this behavior (research question 3).

We considered that a qualitative approach was the most appropriate to explain how job characteristics and organizational design influence the engagement-disengagement process. Spain is one of the world's leading tourist destinations and tourism is a major engine of economic and social development in this country. This industry accounted for 14.6% of the Spanish Gross Domestic Product, sustaining 2.8 million jobs in 2019 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2020). Moreover, this industry is comprised of mainly small-and-medium-sized enterprises, which often are not able to adapt their organizational procedures to get higher employee engagement.

This study contributes to the understanding of people's behaviors and organizations at work by discussing and empirically exploring how intangible factors may enhance work engagement. We also propose an integrated model of work engagement-disengagement underpinned by factors at the individual, job, and organizational level to support the design of better workplaces.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we review the main contributions of prior studies to the literature on work engagement. Subsequent sections focus on the research methodology, sampling strategy, data collection, analysis, and study results. Finally, a

discussion of the theoretical and practical implications is provided, along with limitations and future study suggestions.

2 Literature review

Previous research on work engagement has mainly investigated the influence of job demands and resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), personal resources (Paek *et al.*, 2015; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009), human resource practices (Alfes *et al.*, 2013), empowerment (Kim and Oh, 2012), or transformational leadership (Monje Amor *et al.*, 2020). Most of the research is based on quantitative studies that test validated theories and hypotheses, but only a limited number of studies have explored this concept from a more thorough and qualitative perspective (Kahn, 1990; Shuck *et al.*, 2011).

Hitherto, the importance of intangible factors and intrinsic motivation has still received too little attention in the literature on work engagement (Putra *et al.*, 2015). Ryan and Deci's (2000) theory of motivation and the job demands-resources theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how employees may feel engaged at work. Intrinsic motivation alludes to doing something because it is inherently enjoyable or stimulating. Certain intangible factors and favorable work conditions may act as motivators and a source of competitive advantage for work engagement. Resourceful work environments and an intellectually stimulating job may also boost work engagement (Laschinger *et al.*, 2009; Spreitzer, 1995).

The job demands-resources model postulates that every job includes demands and resources. Job demands (e.g., workload, role conflict, job insecurity) refer to the job aspects that "require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs" (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001, p. 501). On the other hand, job resources (e.g., supervisor support, role clarity, availability of tools) are the aspects of the job that do any of the following: "(a) be functional in achieving work

goals; (b) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development". Job demands refer to a stress process that may result in burnout, whereas job resources generate a motivational process that may lead to work engagement (Schaufeli, 2017).

Saks and Gruman (2018) concluded that socialization resources (e.g., supervisor support, recognition, and feedback) could be used to foster work engagement through personal resources and person-organization fit perceptions. Previously, Putra *et al.* (2015) had already shown that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation were significant predictors of work engagement in the hospitality industry, but intrinsic motivation played a more important role in driving work engagement. In effect, the literature demonstrates that there has been a shift from monetary incentives and extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Memon *et al.* (2017) showed that work engagement mediated the relationship between pay satisfaction and turnover intention.

Additionally, leaders are expected to play a central role in the development of work engagement. Prior studies have explored the impact of different types of leadership, such as leader-member exchange (Altinay *et al.*, 2019), empowering leadership (Albrecht and Andreetta, 2011), or transformational leadership (Monje Amor *et al.*, 2020) on work engagement. A growing body of research has revealed that fostering transformational leadership is linked to numerous organizational benefits, such as performance (see, for example, Harter *et al.*, 2002; Monje Amor *et al.*, 2020). However, there is not yet a model integrating these different perspectives from a multidisciplinary approach. For an extended literature review on work engagement, please refer to Appendix 1.

3 Methods

3.1 Research participants

We conducted a multiple case study in four small-and-medium-sized enterprises

among a purposive sample of 25 tourism industry employees in Galicia, northwest Spain. We selected this region because it was where tourism demand increased the most in Spain in 2019 (INE, 2020) and because of its similarities with other European regions of the Atlantic area, such as Ireland, north of Portugal, or west of France. The organizations selected had little hierarchical structure and included two hotels and two travel agencies. The sample settings comprised a dynamic and young workforce, working in small teams where managers were approachable. Table 1 presents the research participants' descriptions.

Table 1 Research participants

Organization	Participants	Occupation
Hotel A	5	1 Hotel General Manager
		1 Housekeeper
		3 Front Desk employees
Hotel B	5	1 Hotel Manager
		2 Housekeepers
		2 Front Desk employees
Travel agency A	7	1 Regional Manager
		2 Office Managers
		4 Travel Agents
Travel agency B	8	1 CEO
		1 Call Centre Coordinator
		1 Marketing Assistant
		1 Office Administrator
		4 Travel Agents

Each of the organizations was asked to select several employees, comprising staff holding managerial and non-managerial positions, to capture a wider variety of staff groups and roles. To report the research findings, each key informant was given an identification number to manage anonymity. E1, E2,... E18 are research participants in

non-managerial positions, whereas M1, M2,... M7 are research participants in managerial positions. Participant demographics are displayed in Table 2.

A purposive sampling approach was used to select an appropriate sample, ensuring both genders, age cohorts, and different job titles in the hospitality industry were included. A total of 25 individuals were recruited, of whom 76% were women and 24% were men, aged between 23 and 60, with an average age of 35. 64% of individuals had a permanent contract, and 76% worked full-time. 72% of participants held non-managerial positions, and the mean organizational tenure was 5 years.

Table 2 Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants (N = 25)

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
Under 30	10	40
30-40	7	28
More than 41	8	32
Gender		
Female	19	76
Male	6	24
Type of contract		
Temporary	9	36
Permanent	16	64
Work hours		
Part-time	6	24
Full-time	19	76
Position		
Non-managerial	18	72
Managerial	7	28
Organizational tenure		
< 12 months	5	20
1-10 years	16	64

| 10+ years | 4 | 16 |

3.2 Data collection

First, access to organizations was gained and managers were contacted by telephone. No prior relationships with participants were established before data collection. Participation was voluntary and all individuals were acquainted with the scope of the study, reasons for doing the research, confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent forms were signed prior to conducting the interviews.

Interviews lasted 39 to 73 minutes, with an average interview time of 56 minutes. Interviews were conducted in September 2019 by the first author and were carried out in the workplace during participants' work hours, in a designated office where privacy was guaranteed and there were no external disturbances.

Following Yin's case study approach (2009), one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted to get a better understanding of the employees' attitudes, experiences at work, perceptions of work engagement, its drivers, and consequences of engagement in the tourism industry. This method allowed researchers to investigate thoroughly the participants' opinions and motives (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). An interview guide was used, which consisted of warm-up questions about the participant's demographics and work history, as well as open-ended questions that focused on six key areas: 1) the perception of work engagement, 2) general feelings about engagement and its consequences, 3) differences among engaged and disengaged employees, 4) the influence of the leader, 5) how to increase the levels of work engagement, and 6) the meaning of work engagement for the respondents.

The interview was pilot tested to ensure all relevant topics were covered. The critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954; McClelland, 1973) was used to carry out the

one-to-one interviews. This method enables participants to explain in detail how, why, and to what extent they feel engaged or disengaged at work.

Participants were asked to report incidents and relate times when they felt engaged and disengaged at work, the main drivers of engagement, its consequences, and the role of management in shaping their levels of work engagement. Conversations were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Interviews were conducted until overarching themes and categories were repeated several times and incidents did not report new patterns. Thus, saturation was achieved (Saunders *et al.*, 2018; Trotter, 2012).

3.3 Data analysis

We followed the theory-building process-tracing approach (Beach and Pedersen, 2013), which focused on building a theory based on understanding causal mechanisms among variables in complex situations. Inductive thematic analysis was used following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide, a qualitative method widely used in psychology and management. First, researchers became familiar with the data by listening to tape recordings, reading, and reviewing field notes and transcripts. Second, keywords from responses were searched for, transcripts were analyzed, and codes were developed using an iterative process entailing continuous revisiting of theory and inspection of raw data from the interviews. Next, predominant themes were constructed and reviewed, drawing upon prior research and attempting to enrich current theories. Lastly, themes were defined and named.

We followed Boyatzis (1998) to develop the data-driven codes using NVivo version 12. The raw data were first analyzed to recognize repeated expressions and keywords that served as a basis for the development of the first set of codes. Initial open coding was carried out line-by-line to ensure in-depth analysis was conducted and descriptive labels were generated. Codes were created from the recurrence of the same

patterns in the events described by individuals (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994), mirroring the content of the categories identified. Next, a preliminary set of codes were developed and clustered into categories that shared similar attributes, meanings, or behaviors.

Fifteen categories were identified and the categories were collapsed into four themes. Themes were checked against each other and the original raw data, concluding that each theme was consistent and unique. Any disagreements in the coding were debated until a consensus was reached among all researchers. Two independent coders were used to compute the percentage of agreement to assess the inter-rater validity of the generated themes and categories (Krippendorff, 2004). A level of agreement greater than 75% was achieved.

4 Results

The first theme that dominates the data is the type of tasks and the work itself. It refers to work content and how it is perceived by individuals and encompasses five categories that affect levels of work engagement. The second theme alludes to the social relations that happen in the workplace and contains three main intangible aspects that influence current levels of work engagement. The third theme focuses on five organizational resources that are favorable to work engagement. The last theme addresses features of work engagement and attributes of an engaged workforce. Table 3 summarizes the themes and categories identified.

Table 3 Summary of results

Themes	Categories
1. Type of tasks	Self-determination
	Task variety
	Challenge
	Role clarity
	Meaningful work

2. Social relations	Recognition
	Relationships at work
	Support
3. Organizational resources	Opportunities for learning and development
	Communication
	Work-life balance
	Equipment and material resources
	Leadership style
4. Understanding work engagement	Features of work engagement
	Attributes of engaged employees

4.1 Type of tasks

4.1.1 Self-determination

The first category derived from the data was self-determination. When participants were asked about what they liked the most about their job, they alluded to experiences when they perceived they had the freedom or could make decisions as to how the work was done:

> I like being autonomous and not having to stick to a strict place or schedule. This flexibility allows me to make decisions more easily and manage my time effectively. I decide when and how I carry out my work, so I manage my time according to the needs of the organization. (M1, Hotel A)
>
> I can have leeway to organize my tasks and do my work. (E8, Travel agency A)

4.1.2 Task variety

Task variety was cited among participants in all organizations, and such responses are suggestive of the fact that "diverse work", "a dynamic job", "a job that rotates tasks to break up routine" or "a job that is not monotonous" may be associated with work engagement:

> I love talking to customers because each one has a story to tell. I always learn something new from their travel experiences. (M5, Hotel B)
>
> I really like doing check-ins and check-outs because I can interact with people from other places, and I find it very dynamic, as each customer is different; it's not a monotonous job. (E10, Hotel B)

4.1.3 Challenge

Several participants recalled challenging experiences they had when they were asked about a time they felt engaged at work. Many individuals admitted that challenging tasks kept them motivated, especially when they were completed on time and successfully:

> I face different challenges every day, and that is what keeps me going. … Their flight was cancelled, so I looked for different alternatives and managed to change their flight, despite it being high season. (E8, Travel agency A)
>
> One day, the hotel was fully booked … It was very challenging because I had to do everything right, fast, and provide top-notch service. (E9, Hotel B)

4.1.4 Role clarity

Many participants described situations that alluded to role clarity or lack thereof. They mentioned that organizations should clearly specify the job responsibilities and tasks in the job description so that employees are aware of what is expected of them at work, what they must do, and how to do it.

Conversely, a few employees stated that a lack of role clarity made them feel disengaged or burned out:

> A few months ago, I was assigned a new project, and I didn't know what I had to do. I was uninformed, working long hours, and I burned out. (E2, Hotel A)

Sometimes I did not know how to proceed at work and the information was not clear. I was making mistakes and giving the wrong information to customers because I lacked direction, and my tasks were not clear or well-defined. (E10, Hotel B)

4.1.5 Meaningful work

Meaningful work entails interesting work content and finding significance, meaning, or purpose at work. Nonetheless, meaningful work depends on people's expectations and career prospects:

I see my job as helping to deliver high-quality customer service. (E12, Hotel B)

I love my job because I sell dreams and experiences. (E5, Travel agency A)

In summary, the first theme broadly encompasses characteristics of job design that may positively influence work engagement.

4.2 Social relations

4.2.1 Recognition

The most salient factor reported by all participants was recognition. This category involves thanking employees by showing appreciation regularly in unexpected ways, complimenting them for their insights, providing praise for their contributions, performance, and accomplishments, as well as encouraging employee involvement:

Feeling recognized by the company through more responsibility and words of appreciation such as "well done" or "thank you" makes me feel my effort and dedication are worthwhile. (E1, Hotel A)

On the other hand, a lack of recognition made individuals feel disengaged:

I feel disengaged when I cannot explain myself and I am not listened to while trying to make my point. (E5, Travel agency A)

I felt unappreciated by my managers because my suggestions and ideas were not listened to. Thus, I ended up being disengaged. (M5, Hotel B)

In line with the last passages, individuals emphasized the importance of valuing their suggestions and ideas, as they are the ones who are always in contact with customers and know best what they need. Employees also affirmed that when they perceived their work was recognized, they felt valued and more empowered, and this helped to create a sense of belonging in the workplace.

4.2.2 Relationships at work

Maintaining positive relationships at work enhances work engagement:

Building relationships at work with customers and employees is what I like the most about my job. (M2, Travel agency A)

I think it is crucial to have healthy relationships at work, bond with colleagues, have a laugh with them, and support each other. (E9, Hotel B)

Participants also stressed the importance of "collaboration", "teamwork", "team spirit", "good atmosphere", "getting along with colleagues" and "a relaxed environment" at work. Nevertheless, when participants were asked to recall a time they felt disengaged, some respondents described situations where employees clashed and they had to deal with employee conflict, suggesting that negative people can bring down a whole team:

Having a bad relationship with colleagues makes me feel disengaged because we work hand in hand, and it is very difficult to spend eight hours a day with people I do not get along with. (E7, Travel agency A)

4.2.3 Support

Numerous participants believed that organizations might encourage work engagement by bolstering employees:

It's nice when you have supportive colleagues. We spend many hours together, and it is very difficult not to get emotionally attached to some of them. (E2, Hotel A)

Organizations should be supportive, resolve conflicts we may have with suppliers, and help us carry out our work effectively. (E6, Travel agency A)

These categories encompass different social relations that can be given in actions or words, which may be key to developing trust and employee morale.

4.3 Organizational resources

4.3.1 Opportunities for learning and development

Many individuals expressed a preference for learning and development opportunities:

There are opportunities for on-the-job learning and development for everyone here. Employees can learn from experience if they are assigned a new task or if they take on more responsibility, but the role of the leader is crucial and should provide support and coaching when needed. (M7, Travel agency B)

Organizations should provide more opportunities for career advancement. Most of the workforce is female, and most managerial positions are held by men. (E8, Travel agency A)

Participants also recognized that training is a key instrument for learning and that efforts should concentrate on integrating more formal or informal training according to the team's needs:

The company must recognize that human capital is the key to company success. If organizations don't take care of their employees by investing in training and resources, they will not succeed. (E7, Travel agency A)

4.3.2 Communication

Participants stressed that the presence of "information sharing", "active listening", "open communication" and "keeping employees informed" were central aspects to work engagement, suggesting that managers should be accessible so that people can ask questions, make suggestions, and express concerns:

> The company must be honest in all respects, explain why and what decisions are made, and stress the things that are done well over those that are done wrong. We have to move away from the archaic way of working characterized by rigid rules and hierarchy. (M7, Travel agency B)

4.3.3 Work-life balance

Striking a balance between work and life was an important factor for many participants. Specifically, the following aspects were cited as something desirable:

> My ideal job would optimize the time devoted to work, the resources, and the person. Maybe an employee who works 6 hours instead of 9 performs better, is more productive, and is engaged. (M3, Travel agency A)

> Management proposed that I keep working from home instead of leaving. Working remotely made me feel really engaged with the company. (E17, Travel agency B)

Work-life balance and flexibility were far more important to them than, for example, pay, which they believed could never counterbalance "more time with kids", "flexible working hours", or "telecommuting". Interestingly, only seven participants out of twenty-five mentioned pay as a key factor in their current jobs.

Additionally, a number of participants highlighted the pitfalls of some organizational structures, especially large and hierarchical organizations, which might thwart flexible working practices:

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In my previous job, engagement was wearing out little by little because it was a large company, policies and procedures were strict, things were obsolete, and it was too hierarchical. Organizations should change the old-fashioned way of working towards more flexible policies and procedures. For example, I would like to leave an hour earlier or work from home some days to pick up my kids. (M6, Travel agency B)

4.3.4 Equipment and material resources

The provision of sufficient material resources and the right tools and equipment to carry out one's work was dominant among eight individuals:

Organizations should provide appropriate tools, such as computer systems. The fact that computer systems work badly generates stress, discomfort, and delays in our work. (M2, Travel agency A)

My previous organization should have modernized equipment and resources. Having the necessary resources at your disposal is extremely important in my job. (E2, Hotel A)

4.3.5 Leadership

When participants were asked about the role of the leader in shaping levels of work engagement, employees indicated that leaders who were "open", "supportive", "approachable", "inspiring", and "encourage participation" were likely to enhance work engagement. However, they may have a negative impact on engagement if they are "unsupportive", "don't convey information", or "don't solve problems":

Work engagement and management go hand in hand. Engagement needs managers who encourage teamwork, a positive work environment, support, and good communication. (E12, Hotel B)

Managers underscored the importance of "walking the walk", "creating a good environment", "putting people first", and "making decisions by consensus":

> I believe that the line manager has the biggest impact on engagement. My behavior as a leader aims to motivate employees, support them, talk to them, have a close relationship with them, and give them feedback. I try to reflect and analyze situations to find win-win solutions, challenge people's mindsets, and provide expertise and new ways of doing things. (M1, Hotel A)

> The manager's attitude is paramount to the smooth running of the company. It is all about effective communication, respect, and the exchange of ideas. Disrespect encourages discomfort at work and affects work engagement negatively. (M3 Travel agency A)

4.4 Understanding work engagement

4.4.1 Features of work engagement

Participants were asked to define or describe their perception of work engagement in their own words, and several commonalities were found among all definitions. Four main features of work engagement were identified: 1) a positive feeling, 2) an emotional connection, 3) a cognitive aspect, and 4) a voluntary action:

> To me, engagement is the willingness to give discretionary effort, to go over and above the call of duty because you have an emotional connection with your employer. (M4, Travel agency A)

> Being engaged is caring about your work and your company and devoting time to it because you really feel part of the company, you want things to go well, and you want to do something that nobody has asked you to do. (E3, Hotel A)

Individuals perceived work engagement as a positive feeling. Examples are: "feeling of excitement", "feeling happy and motivated", and "a job that makes me feel happy every morning when I get out of bed". They also felt an attachment to or an emotional connection with the organization, the team they worked with, or the task itself: "a feeling of belonging to the organization", "a positive connection with the company", "feeling of union and belonging to the workplace", "devoted to my job", "feeling part of the organization", and "caring about the organization". The third feature of engagement is a cognitive aspect that refers to "giving your best at work", "exerting yourself to accomplish my tasks" or "doing your best at work". Engagement was perceived as a voluntary action; that is, individuals feel engaged because they "feel like it", "do something nobody has asked you to do", and "do it voluntarily".

4.4.2 Attributes of employees

This category encompasses the attributes of both work engagement and disengagement, focusing primarily on the positive features. Individuals were asked about the distinctiveness of engaged employees in contrast to disengaged employees. Findings suggest that engaged employees are believed to possess certain attributes such as "having initiative", being "proactive", "dynamic", "collaborative", or "optimistic". Conversely, disengaged employees are believed to "do the bare minimum", "complain about work", "get distracted easily", or "have little enthusiasm".

Participants narrated different events and accentuated the way the experience itself made them feel and advocated that engagement might bring about positive organizational outcomes such as "performance", "customer satisfaction", or "employee retention", whereas disengagement might lead to consequences such as "employee turnover", or "low productivity".

Moreover, participants indicated that work engagement was contagious. Employees conceded that positive emotions were passed from one person to another. For example, when customers are satisfied or colleagues are content at work, they may leverage employees' levels of work engagement.

5 Discussion

The aim of this research paper was to explore the influence of intangible factors on work engagement from a qualitative viewpoint, considering different hierarchical levels. Four main themes were identified among a sample of workers in a multiple case study through in-depth interviews.

The first research question asked which intangible factors influenced work engagement. Our findings suggest that the type of work, social relations, and organizational resources may enhance work engagement. In fact, self-management allows employees to organize their tasks, learn how to prioritize, and become more involved in the organization because they participate in the decision-making process, building a sense of ownership (Amah and Ahiauzu, 2013). These results are aligned with those of Halbesleben (2010) and Bhutto *et al.* (2021). The findings further indicate that inspiring leaders help employees see how they contribute to the organization's higher purpose as they instill a sense of self-worth, self-motivation, success, and achievement in those who follow them.

The second research question focused on how individuals perceive work engagement. The participants' definitions of work engagement were in line with Schaufeli *et al.'s* (2002) conceptualization of engagement, as individuals revealed a personal attachment to their work roles and peers (emotional component) and a cognitive aspect derived from their effort, a positive feeling, and a voluntary action.

The third research question investigated the contextual factors that underlie work engagement. Contextual factors represent specific settings, features, and qualities that are unique to a specific industry, group, or individual. The findings indicate that contextual factors that influence work engagement differ significantly across genders, job titles, and age cohorts. For example, female employees and employees with kids prioritized free time and flexibility over pay, while other employees emphasized the importance of having a flexible and flatter organizational structure with open communication and clear directions.

Based on these research findings, a work engagement-disengagement framework, depicted in Figure 1, was designed. This model consists of three levels: individual, job, and organizational level. The individual level refers to characteristics of participants such as personality traits (dispositional attribution), attitudes, emotions, and expectations. Literature on work engagement has demonstrated that personality (Sonnentag *et al.*, 2010) and certain personal resources and dispositional characteristics (e.g., self-efficacy, optimism, proactivity, conscientiousness, resilience) are positively associated with work engagement (Bakker *et al.*, 2012; Christian *et al.*, 2011; Dai *et al.*, 2019). Second, different components at the job level may influence work engagement or disengagement. For example, having a meaningful job that is varied, challenging, and with a clear purpose may encourage work engagement. Lastly, the organizational level concerns elements within the work environment such as recognition, having supportive colleagues and managers, opportunities for growth, a climate of open communication, and access to appropriate resources. These findings are consistent with those of Laschinger *et al.* (2009).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

5.1 Theoretical contributions

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This qualitative study makes two theoretical contributions. First, this research offers an alternative approach to the literature on human resource management and organizational behavior by proposing a model that shows factors at the individual, job, and organizational levels that facilitate work engagement and disengagement. This framework is consistent with the intrinsic motivation theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) and offers a complementary perspective to the job demands-resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2017), thus expanding the nomological net of work engagement. These findings are significant because they help academics and practitioners understand the underlying motivational processes of work engagement.

Second, this is the first study that examines which intangible factors may lead to work engagement and how work engagement is perceived in the tourism industry, taking account of employees' and managers' perspectives. We advance the knowledge in the field by extending previous qualitative studies (Kahn, 1990; Shuck *et al.*, 2011) that focused on similar yet different concepts and perspectives, namely personal engagement and engagement from an employee viewpoint. Furthermore, service industries like tourism and hospitality are relevant settings for work engagement as they can benefit from increased customer service and greater economic returns.

5.2 Practical implications

First, this study shows that intangible factors (e.g., task variety, challenging work, and support) are more relevant to work engagement than extrinsic motivators such as fringe benefits and monetary rewards. Many employees working in the tourism and hospitality industries are front-line employees, so they build customer relationships on a regular basis. These results impact the economy and society because work engagement may positively influence employees' well-being, customer satisfaction, productivity, and stimulate organizational change. This suggests that tourism and hospitality management

should not neglect the power of the intrinsic parts of the job when the external conditions of the environment prevent the use of monetary incentives. Thus, it might be worthwhile for organizations and managers to focus on making jobs more interesting and meaningful because it increases intrinsic motivation and, in turn, enhances employees' engagement. This can be achieved by informing employees of their impact and contribution to the organization, setting clear expectations, showing them that their work does matter, and involving them in the decision-making process (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2010).

Second, our findings also reinforce the role of employee empowerment and resourceful workplaces in the promotion of work engagement (Spreitzer, 1995). This suggests that managers should delegate more and give employees autonomy with the intention of empowering them so that they can learn and develop their professional careers. It is therefore important to facilitate the necessary job resources, give feedback, and create a work climate that enhances a positive disposition among service employees and customers through recognition, support, and access to relevant information.

Third, this study shows that organizational structures may influence leadership and, ultimately, work engagement. In effect, small and medium-sized enterprises can enjoy greater flexibility than large organizations due to the simplicity of their internal organization. Thus, small organizations are more adaptable and responsive to changes that occur (Cardon and Stevens, 2004), which provides an unexpected competitive advantage in the massive crisis in the tourism industry. This is also relevant to the research context, as the Spanish hospitality industry is made up of many small and medium-sized enterprises. Organizations could promote work engagement through a participative leadership style and the development of management practices that foster participation and people development (Harter *et al.*, 2002). For example, leaders could support subordinates by listening to them, encouraging them, and giving employees more

autonomy. Besides enhancing work engagement, this may help reduce job demands associated with the tourism industry and handle the daily pressures of complaints and challenging customers.

6 Limitations and directions for future research

This research has some limitations. First, the multiple case study has focused on the hospitality industry in northwest Spain, which may limit the generalization of results to other work settings, although we selected the region for its growth potential and similarities with other Atlantic regions.

We accounted for different types of employees, both in managerial and non-managerial positions, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between work engagement and intangible factors. Nonetheless, this study did not aim to look for differences and similarities across hierarchical levels. Future research should take account of different industries and larger samples and combine this method with direct observations of real interactions to relate the employee's perceptions with behaviors in the organizational context, one of the biggest research challenges in social sciences.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the extent to which the factors identified influence work engagement could not be measured. Consequently, one interesting line for theory development would be the use of quantitative methods to examine the relationships among leadership styles, empowerment, and work engagement, controlling for job demands and resources. Also, longitudinal research or diary studies are needed to examine the stability of work engagement over time.

As in other qualitative studies based on in-depth interviews, another limitation is researcher partiality (Gough and Madill, 2012). Even though efforts have been made to develop codes and themes inductively, assumptions have stemmed from theoretical

underpinnings and prior research. However, it is undeniable that there may be some subjectivity in the interpretation of the findings. Further, participants signed up voluntarily and the interviewer followed a neutral approach, focusing on how participants understood work engagement and how they interpreted their experiences, attempting to reduce this potential bias (Rubin and Rubin, 2012).

Finally, future studies should analyze whether personal traits associated with work engagement (e.g., proactivity, self-efficacy, and conscientiousness) can buffer factors at the job or organization level that lead to disengagement, such as lack of recognition, bad work environment, or monotonous work in times of crisis. Future research might also explore the extent to which the high or low season in the tourism industry influences intangible factors and work engagement due to changes in work intensity.

7 Conclusion

This qualitative study advances knowledge about the understanding of people at work and the antecedents of work engagement in the tourism industry. It has identified the main determinants and features of work engagement and well-being in the Galician tourism industry (Spain). This study lends credence to the importance of empowerment and leadership styles in the enhancement of work engagement. As a final contribution for academics and practitioners, an integrated model of engagement-disengagement is proposed to foster the levels of work engagement through intangible factors.

Acknowledgements

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