Exploring Wasta and Religious Values and Principles: A Case Study of Employee Engagement in the UAE Hospitality Sector

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the socio-cultural concept 'Wasta' as well as religious values and principles in employee engagement in the hospitality industry in the United Arab Emirates, embedded in the country's socio-economic, cultural and institutional context. This study investigates employee engagement through the theoretical lenses of Positive Psychology and Positive Organizational Scholarship to understand the positive work environment in which individuals flourish and become engaged.

Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 41 employees in the case study hotel in Dubai, findings from this empirical case study research show that the manifestation of EE is influenced by a country's religious and socio-cultural context, as well as macro-environmental crisis events, notably the Covid-19 pandemic. At an organisational level, findings show the importance of creating an organizational ecosystem in which EE can flourish. Findings further reveal that the concept of Wasta and Islamic values, work ethics and principles in the Middle East were embedded in the case study hotel's culture, values, work environment and people-management practices, fostering Trait, State and Behavioural Engagement.

This paper contributes to the literature by positioning employee engagement in a nomological net of relationships between national institutional and socio-cultural factors and religious principles and values to advance our understanding in a holistic way of employee engagement in the Hospitality Industry in the United Arab Emirates. This paper helps organisations to focus on specific attributes of engagement and accordingly implement evidence-based practices to enhance positive affect, cognition and behaviour of employees, ultimately resulting in positive human/social outcomes, as well as organizational sustainability outcomes.

Keywords: employee engagement, hospitality industry, Middle East Gulf region, United Arab Emirates, Dubai

1. Introduction

In today's global business environment with ever-increasing demands for efficiency, agility and resilience, engagement of employees with work and the organisation is critical to an organization's flexibility, adaptability, vitality, growth, profitability, success and survival.

Employee engagement which is described as a positive psychological state of being that is related to the work environment that results in behaviours that lead to desirable organizational outcomes (Osam & Shuck, 2020).) has emerged as an important priority for organizational leaders and management practitioners.

Myriad studies have found that employee engagement (EE) is associated with team morale, employee productivity, job performance, quality of work, well-being, a happier and healthier workforce, innovative behaviour and organizational citizenship behaviour,

absenteeism, employee turnover intention (Gifford & Young, 2021; Gull et al., 2020; Osam & Shuck, 2020; Valk & Yousif, 2021). Furthermore, organizations with a highly engaged workforce experience increased service quality, innovation and productivity, customer loyalty, enhanced brand image, customer/guest satisfaction, organizational effectiveness, financial performance, e.g. return on assets and equity, sales and revenue growth and profits (Chandani et al., 2016; Gifford & Young, 2021; Gull et al., 2020; Macey et al., 2009; Onsøyen et al., 2009; Saks, 2006). Evidently, EE has many positive individual and organizational outcomes, yet fostering EE has emerged as one of the greatest challenges in today's workplace. This is manifested through the 'Great Resignation' (Bloomberg, 2021) across the globe, which implies that employees are feeling disengaged, disconnected and disillusioned by work. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in hospitality organisations.

Hospitality organizations, especially hotels, operate on sophistication and complexity due to the wide diversity of work tasks, job positions and working conditions, including physically and psychologically demanding work, e.g. working under very high time pressure, and dealing with demanding and, at times, hostile guests (Onsøyen et al., 2009). Working in hospitality requires an engaged workforce to deliver quality hospitality and service to guests that exceed their high expectations to provide positive guest experiences (Onsøyen et al., 2009; Valk & Yousif, 2021). An engaged workforce can therefore be viewed as a competitive advantage and a key strategic asset to organisations.

Given the link between EE and individual and organisational outcomes, the topic of engagement has garnered increasing attention over the past three decades among academia and practitioners (Shuck et al., 2021). Yet, there is a dearth of research on EE in the hospitality industry and there is a need for more in-depth understanding of how EE unfolds in hospitality organisations. Such research is particularly pertinent to the Middle East, an under-researched region in the world (Al-Twal et al., 2019). The region has generated a growing interest among businesses, researchers and policymakers, because the countries of the Middle East hold substantial importance for the world, politically, geographically and economically (Ali & Weir, 2020). Furthermore, the region continues to economically grow amidst socio-political and security-related developments (Budhwar et al., 2019; Budhwar & Mellahi, 2016).

This particularly pertains to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Geographically, economically, politically and legally, the UAE holds a unique position, because it is a relatively stable and secure country in an otherwise tumultuous region (Baruch & Forstenlechner, 2017). The UAE is an emerging, highly-developed, rich and urbanised Gulf state that has become a regional economic power (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014; Ali & Weir, 2020; Budhwar et al., 2019). The tourism and hospitality industry is of significant importance to the economy and labour market of the UAE. The UAE has a noteworthy track record in tourism as, within the Middle East Region, the UAE was the only country to exceed pre-COVID-19 pandemic tourism levels in the first 7 months of 2022. The UAEs history, culture,[1] etiquette, social characteristics, geo-political and economic contexts, national regulatory framework, institutional environment, labour market dynamics and dualities are distinct from Western countries (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014; Ewers & Dicce, 2016; Singh et al., 2021). This makes the UAE an interesting novel context to study EE, even more so as Ewers and Dicce (2016), Ali and Weir (2020), Budhwar et al. (2019) called for more contextually-embedded and context-specific research on EE in the Middle East. Therefore, this paper responds to their call by researching EE embedded in the socio-cultural and religious context of the UAE. Furthermore, there is limited qualitative research available on EE in the UAE context, as numerical data are prioritized over qualitative engagement data (Osam & Shuck, 2020). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to provide a complementary qualitative contribution to EE research in the UAE context. Last, there is a scarcity of primary data at an organisational level in the GCC countries (Ewers & Dicce, 2016), including the UAE. This provides the rationale for our study. In particular, this paper presents an exploratory, qualitative case study on EE in a hotel in Dubai, one of the seven Emirates, to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context, by collecting primary data on EE at an organisational level in the hospitality industry in Dubai.

The research question that guides this inquiry is:

RQ: What is the role of institutional, sociocultural factors and religious values and principles in Employee Engagement in the Hospitality Industry in Dubai?

This paper contributes to the literature by positioning EE in a nomological net of relationships

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[1] Culture is defined as: "a distinct way of life with common values, attitudes and behaviours that members of a group or society share and that are transmitted over time" (Brewster et al., 2011).

between national, institutional and socio-cultural factors and religious principles and values to advance our understanding in a holistic way of how engagement manifests itself in the hospitality industry in the UAE.

2. Literature review

2.1. Employee engagement

This study investigates EE through the theoretical lenses of Positive Psychology, a movement that seeks to understand what makes people, organizations and societies flourish, placing an emphasis on generating positive affect at work (Luthans, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and Positive Organizational Scholarship, which is concerned with how organizations develop human strength, foster vitality and resilience, and unlock potential (Robbins & Judge, 2022). Viewing EE through the lenses of Positive Psychology and Positive Organizational Scholarship means identifying what is good about organizations and understanding the positive work environment in which individuals flourish and become engaged. Researchers have found that engagement has its roots in a supportive, collaborative, physically and psychologically safe work environment in which employees develop emotionalties and commitment to the organization (Hakim et al., 2022; Kahn, 1990; Osam et al., 2021). Further, engagement is influenced by interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, leadership, and organizational culture- and norms (Fisher, 2014; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Macey et al., 2009).

The concept of EE was introduced by Kahn (1990) who proposed that EE is a pervasive, positive, fulfilling, work-related affective-cognitive state of mind that drives a range of psychological processes from emotions through to complex cognition, attitudes and ensuing positive behaviours of people at work. In concordance with Kahn's proposition, Macey and Schneider (2008) conceptualized EE as positive psychological traits, states, and behaviours and illuminated unique attributes of the conceptual space of EE, depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. Conceptualization and attributes of trait, state, behavioural engagement.

Type of engagement	Attributes
Trait engagement	• positive views of life and work • conscientiousness • positive affect, i.e. high level of activation or energy • cheerfulness and pleasantness • autotelic personality • pro-active attitude • mental resilience • persistence even in the face of difficulties
State engagement	• a psychological or physical state of being and psychological condition of safety: • positive orientation, mood and emotions • enthusiasm • passion • involvement • empowerment • energy and absorption • fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work • a holistic sensation of flow • sense of significance • emotional attachment to the organization and desire to see the organization succeed • sense of inspiration and affirmation one gets from their work and being part of their organization • commitment—the willingness to invest oneself to help the employer succeed • willingness to exert energy in support of the organization • pride in being an organizational member • personal identification with the organization, • work centrality- how important work is in people's lives
Behavioural engagement	• extra-role behaviour • discretionary effort • proactivity • role expansion • Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB)

Source: Adapted from Macey and Schneider (2008).

This conceptualization of EE is valuable as it encompasses a precise and robust multifaceted EE construct that helps researchers in exploring positive affect, states and behaviour that foster EE. Building on this conceptualization, this study positions engagement within the lexicon of work-related affective-cognitive, emotional, psychological states of mind, ensuing positive behaviours of people at work (cf. Kahn, 1990; Parker & Griffin, 2011) that constitute *Trait, State and Behavioural* engagement as conceptualized by Kahn (1990) and Macey and Schneider (2008).

Research in the hospitality industry has found that in interaction with guests, employees must display a calm and pleasant demeanour and regulate their emotional expression regardless of their own emotional state (cf. Onsøyen et al., 2009) (State engagement). Research has also found that people experiencing positive views of life and work have more positive affect, i.e. high level of activation or energy cheerfulness and pleasantness (Trait engagement), are more outgoing, establish positive relations with colleagues and guests and display helpful and service-oriented behaviours to others (Behavioural engagement) (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001). To our knowledge, there is currently no existing research on how sociocultural phenomenon and religious values and principles may be influential in positive views of life and work, positive affect and in establishing positive relations with others and displaying helpful behaviours (Trait and Behavioural engagement). The current study fills the gaps in existing research by exploring how Trait, State and Behavioural engagement might be influenced by socio-cultural phenomena and religious values and principles, addressed in the next section.

2.2. EE embedded in institutional, religious and socio-cultural contexts of Arab countries

An important consideration in the investigation of EE is the role of contextual factors (socio-cultural factors and religious values, ethics and principles), which is currently lacking in the EE literature. This study adopts an emic and indigenous view in exploring EE in the UAE, using socio-cultural and religious phenomena as a theoretical lens for studying the manifestation of EE in the hospitality industry in the UAE. The importance of studying socio-cultural and religious phenomena lies in the potential to develop a deeper, comprehensive, holistic understanding of how socio-cultural and religious factors influence EE in the Arab world.

Wasta[2] is a widespread cultural phenomenon in Arab countries and is deeply rooted in the cultures, collectivist societies and collective narratives of Arab countries (Ali & Weir, 2020; Alsarhan et al., 2021; Hofstede, 2001). The tradition of *Wasta* stems from the Arabic social texture that emphasizes family connections and the social fabric (Alsarhan et al., 2021). Wasta constitutes an exclusive and familial, social, informal network of relationships in which the individual is embedded; these networks are often reflections of societal structures and deeply engrained into the respective cultural environment (AlHussan & Al-Husan, 2022; Ali & Weir, 2020; Horak, 2022). *Wasta* is part of the Arab culture in which there is a powerful sense of group membership and group orientation (Hofstede, 2001).

As such, there are strong social ties, network cohesion and loyalty among network members in the countries of the Arab Middle East in support of social well-being (Ali & Weir, 2020; Horak, 2022).

Wasta networks include family and kin, social clans, as well as closed-group members, such as friends and colleagues who offer goodwill and provide social support and a safety net in time of need (Ali & Weir, 2020; Horak, 2022). Within these networks, the practice of receiving preferential treatment from relatives, friends, or other acquaintances who are in positions of power or authority is a widespread phenomenon (Alsarhan et al., 2021). Therefore, the practice of *Wasta* in the Arab world can be understood as an intervention on behalf of others or helping others attain something they cannot achieve alone, i.e. the achievement of a specific goal, such as meeting corporate goals or getting ahead professional and personal growth (Ali & Weir, 2020; Al-Twal et al., 2019; Brandstaetter et al., 2016; Horak, 2022).

Literature suggests the influence of *Wasta* on Human Resource Management (HRM) practices within organizations in various sectors (Al-Twal et al., 2019), particularly in seeking employment and securing a job and promotion (Ali & Weir, 2020; Horak, 2022). Yet, *Wasta* has not been explored in relation to EE in the hospitality industry. Our study fills this gap by extending research on *Wasta* contextualizing it to a particular industry, the hospitality industry, and a particular Arab country, the UAE. Such research will enable better formulation

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[2] The word *wasta* in Arab countries refers to the practice of receiving preferential treatment from relatives, friends, or other acquaintances who are in positions of power or authority, to achieve gains such as getting a job or promotion (Baruch & Forstenlechner, 2017). Although *wasta* depends on the reciprocity of mutual benefits providers do not necessarily receive favors immediately from their beneficiaries; rather, they without being certain they will receive reciprocal favors (Ali & Weir, 2020).

and implementation of organisational practices to enhance EE in Arab countries.

In addition to the cultural phenomenon *Wasta,* a sensitive contextual factor worthy of recognition is 'Religion' and its role in working lives. Religion is expressed through Islamic[3] values, work ethics and principles (cf. Branine & Pollard, 2010; Rokhman, 2010; Yousef, 2001): 1) *Al-Amanah*-trust in relationships leading to accountability; 2) *Al-Sedq* - truthfulness (between superiors and subordinates) to the best of one's knowledge leading to honesty and trustworthiness; 3) *Adl*-fairness and equality in employment relationships justice); 4) *Etqan*-self-improvement which provides the basis for one's striving for self-betterment in order to do better work. This would translate into doing better, working harder and improving the quality of products and services through the learning of new knowledge and skills; 5) *Shura* consultation, cooperation in work, consensus-based decision-making, social harmony and respect, concern for the wellbeing of employees and society at large. There is a dearth of research on how religion affects EE. A notable exception is a study by Abu Bakar et al. (2018) in Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country, who found that Islamic work ethic emphasizes hard work, respect and satisfaction-a dimension of State engagement. Presently, no studies exist that have empirically explored how *Wasta* and Islamic values, work ethics and principles influence Trait, State and Behaviour engagement in the hospitality industry in the UAE. Hence, the current study aims to obtain an in-depth appreciation of the manifestation of the cultural phenomenon *Wasta* as well as Islamic values, work ethics and principles in the hospitality industry in Dubai, addressed in the next section.

2.3. Hospitality industry in the United Arab Emirate Dubai

The study context is the United Arab Emirates, Dubai, a fast-growing, vibrant, diverse destination in the GCC region. Dubai departed from its dependence on oil and embarked on liberalisation and diversification of its economy with the creation of special economic zones (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014; Budhwar et al., 2019). The hospitality and tourism industry is the backbone of

Dubai's economy with a share of 11.5% of the Emirate's Gross Domestic Product in 2019; the expected contribution of the industry to the UAE's GDP is AED 264.5 billion by 2027 (Godinho, 2022a). Dubai welcomed 14.36 million international overnight visitors in 2022. The Department of Economy and Tourism (DET) aims to go back to its pre-COVID-19[4] pandemic levels of 16.73 million visitors and further aims to increase the number of tourists by 40% to 25 million visitors by2025[5] (Godinho, 2022a). In Q1 2022 Dubai ranked first globally in hotel occupancy at 82%. For comparison, hotel occupancy rates in other major destinations in Q1 222 stood at 56% in London, 55% in New York and 51.2% in Paris (Godinho, 2022a).

One of the biggest challenges to the growth of the hospitality industry is the shortage of skilled labour (De Neef in Godinho, 2022b). There is a huge talent demand-supply gap, which in combination with shortage of local workforce, resulted in filling the talent gap by recruiting expatriate employees (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014; Budhwar et al., 2019; Forstenlechner & Mellahi, 2011). The UAE relies heavily on expatriates who staff approximately 96% of the jobs in the private sector (Baruch & Forstenlechner, 2017). The expatriate employees' supply and demand dynamics have led to increased rivalry for skilled staff in the hospitality industry (Brien et al., 2019). Hence, the urge for Dubai's hoteliers to invoke an engaged workforce who are willing and able to deliver excellent guest service and contribute to achieving the organisation's goals and competitiveness in the Dubai hospitality industry. This study empirically explores the engagement of expatriate workers in a hotel in Dubai, as the case study organisation. Such research will help to improve our understanding of how EE in the hospitality industry in Dubai is embedded in the socio-cultural and institutional context of the UAE.

3. Methodology

The method in this study was a case study, which is a comprehensive research strategy suited to explore and conduct comprehensive in-depth analyses of a phenomenon in its context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It involves the study of a case within a real-life setting through detailed, in-depth data collection, analysis

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[3] Islam', an Arabic word, means submission to the will of God in all aspects of life Abu Bakar et al. (2018).

[4] COVID-19 is an infectious acute respiratory virus, first reported in China, that has severely affected day-to-day life of individuals all over the world and resulted in a global health crisis (Sigala, 2020). The travel and hospitality sector has been one of the most negatively impacted industries with negative effects primarily revolving under the psychological impacts that deter tourists from travelling and government restrictions on flights (Kenny & Dutt, 2022).

[5] There are factors exerting a negative influence on Dubai's tourism and hospitality sector-factors beyond its control: the Russian-Ukrainian war crisis, a soaring global inflationary rate that is putting pressure on disposable income of households and a rise in oil prices that is pushing up airfares (Godinho, 2022a, 2022b).

and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2016, 2017). An instrumental case study design and phenomenon-based research (cf. Kenny & Dutt, 2022; Ployhart & Bartunek, 2019) was considered most appropriate, as it uses a particular case to gain a broader appreciation of an issue or phenomenon, in this study the manifestation of the cultural phenomenon *Wasta* and religion and how these influence EE in a real-life setting-the hospitality industry in Dubai.

This study entailed Action Research, an iterative, participatory rigorous research strategy in which scholars and practitioners collaborate, and use academic literature and scientific research methods to solve actual organizational problems and advance scholarly knowledge, ensuring that outcomes inform academic scholarship, as well as organisational practice (Bleijenbergh et al., 2020). Action research is problem-oriented, i.e. the researchers in collaboration with practitioners, seek the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern and seek actionable insights for solving organizational problems (Bleijenbergh et al., 2020). Action research engages practitioners in the research process, building on their experiential knowledge. Therefore, the principal investigator engaged the practitioner, the Head of People & Culture of the case study hotel in the research process, they jointly analysed the organizational EE issues, generated research questions and designed the study. Through Action Research, they sought actionable insights for solving organizational EE problems while simultaneously advancing scholarly knowledge on EE in the hospitality industry in the UAE.

3.1. Research setting

The case study was conducted within DestinationDubai Hotel-an independent, contemporary lifestyle destination hotel in the mid-market segment in Dubai. DestinationDubai Hotel has 264 rooms and nine restaurants, bars and nightlife venues. DestinationDubai Hotel employs 210 employees from 36 different countries.

3.2. Sample and procedure

The sampling technique was purposive sampling to yield insights and an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018; Kenny & Dutt, 2022; Patton, 2015). Analogous to the theoretical sampling procedure advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1998) to purposefully select employees who can aid in answering the research questions to safeguard the validity of the findings, the Head of People & Culture of DestinationDubai Hotel drew the purposive sample from the employee directory. The sample criteria were nationality, age, job position, level and years of work experience. The application of this sampling technique ensured that the sample as a whole represented certain characteristics of the entire population, i.e. the overall workforce of DestinationDubai Hotel. The total sample comprised 41 employees and they participated based on informed consent. Table 2 portrays the sample profile.

The total sample comprised 41 employees and they participated based on informed consent.

The sample represents the unique nature of the workforce in the UAE, i.e. predominantly expatriates from different parts of the world. It highlights the country's dependence on an expatriate workforce, despite the UAE's Emiratization program to reduce this dependence[6] (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014; Budhwar et al., 2019; Ewers & Dicce, 2016). The majority of the sample originated from East or South Asia, closely followed by Africa, with the rest of the sample originating from either Europe or the Middle East.

Gender distribution was 51% female, and 49% male. This favourable female/male ratio is in synch with observations by Baruch and Forstenlechner (2017) that, unlike other countries in the Gulf region, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) it is not uncommon to come across a growing number of female professionals. Age ranged between 21 and 54 years with an average age of 34 years. Organizational tenure ranged between 6 months and 13 years with an average of 4.1 years. All participants had a full-time employment contract, which (at the time of data collection) was mandatory as Dubai employment law required all migrant employees to work full-time. This is a concept not commonly seen in the hospitality industry in other countries where a mixture of full and part-time staff is employed (Brien et al., 2019). The sample profile thus reflects the unique labour market characteristics in the Dubai hospitality industry determined by the specific regulatory structures and institutional contexts.

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[6] The Emiratization program is a Nationalization/Localization program and multi-level process to overcome structural barriers to employment of Emiratis in organizations creating meaningful job opportunities for nationals and increasing preparedness and work readiness of nationals to take up jobs in the private sector through which dependency on the expatriate labor force is reduced. This program is needed, because the public sector is largely saturated and is unlikely to provide sufficient productive job opportunities for future generations of citizens in the UAE. It is a tier-based system of targets, with financial incentives and penalties designed to encourage firms to achieve higher levels of workforce localization (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014; Baruch & Forstenlechner, 2017; Budhwar et al., 2019).

Table 2. Demographic profile sample.

Variable	Dimension	Numbers/ percentages
Total purposive sample	n/a	41 (focus groups: 19 interviews: 22)
Total quota sample	Front Line	18
	Supervisory	7
	Middle Management	11
	Senior management	5
Subsample interviews	Front Line	3
	Supervisory	6
	Middle Management	8
	Senior management	5
Subsample focus groups	Front Line	15
	Supervisory	1
	Middle Management	3
	Senior management	0
Gender	Female	21 (51%)
	Male	20 (49%)
Nationality	Austria	3
	Egypt	2
	Hungary	2
	India	4
	Indonesia	2
	Kenya	6
	Nepal	2
	Nigeria	1
	Pakistan	2
	Philippines	5
	South Africa	2
	Spain	1
	Syria	3
	Thailand	2
	Uganda	1
	United Kingdom	3
Age	Range	21−54 years
	Average	34 years
Organisational tenure	Range	6 months to
	Average	13 years
		4.1 years

3.3. Data collection

In order to develop a thorough understanding of the phenomena under investigation, this case study involved the collection of multiple sources of evidence, using qualitative techniques. In this study, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted to collect qualitative data (cf. Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018; Kenny & Dutt, 2022; Yin, 2016, 2017) on EE. The use of these multiple sources of data (data triangulation) firstly, allowed for approaching the EE from different angles to develop a holistic picture of the phenomenon; secondly, data triangulation allowed for increasing the internal validity and trustworthiness of this study, i.e., the extent to which the method is appropriate to answer the research question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Conducting interviews enabled employees to elaborate on the nuances and complexities of their engagement experiences (cf. Osam et al., 2021) to yield information that helps us understand participants' engagement grounded in the social and religious context of the Arab culture. It also allowed for probing where information seemed to be leading to deeper or unusual insights (Yin, 2016).

In line with the guidelines, our focus groups consisted of 6−10 persons, having a discussion typically lasting for 90−120 min to collect scientific data (Greenbaum, 1998; Morgan, 1998). We reassured employees of the confidentiality of their answers to the questions and the information they would provide so that employees could respond openly and freely (cf. Fisher, 2014). Prior to the interviews and focus groups, all employees received an overview of the research project to give employees an understanding of the concepts and corresponding topics and questions. Furthermore, the research assistants were instructed to give each participant a brief introduction to the aim of the study and the topics of the interview or focus group. The interview protocols and focus group topic lists were designed and conducted by the first author and 6 groups of research assistants with different cultural backgrounds to reduce bias and ethnocentrism in the design and execution of the interviews and focus groups. The semi-structured interview and focus group protocols encompassed open and closed-ended questions based on previous research on EE (Fisher, 2014; Macey et al., 2009; Macey & Schneider, 2008).

A sample interview question was:

> Could you describe what makes you feel engaged with work and with DestinationDubai Hotel?

Focus group topics included *social climate in the workplace, communication and collaboration, culture, vision, values, and work environment.*

The Head of People & Culture granted the researchers access to the hotel premises where 22 face-to-face interviews and two separate focus groups with 19 employees (9 and 10 in each group respectively) took place in April and June 2022, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews and focus groups took the course of an everyday conversation around the participants' working lives and their engagement at work. In this conversation, the moderators of the focus groups worked from a topic guide and questions list, allowing for open discussions and free expression of thoughts and opinions regarding EE within the framework given by the researchers.

3.4. Data analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Inductive content analysis, a highly inductive, data-driven approach (cf. Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020) was performed, consisting of reading each transcribed interview and focus group discussion and applying holistic coding (Miles et al., 2020) of the interview data for content and valence of trait, state and behavioural engagement.

The first author and each of the six groups of research assistants independently coded the data and organized the data into categories that cut across all the data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These were brought together for evaluation to examine similarities and discrepancies in codes and categories of EE. This resulted in categories and dimensions derived from the interview data, which represented the connection between the empirical material and the interpretation of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The coding and categorization process was an iterative process, i.e. conducting successive iterations between theory and data to refine codes and categories (Eisenhardt, 1989; Locke et al., 2022) whilst staying open to discovering concepts that emerged through alternation between the data collection, analysis and sense-making process (Miles et al., 2020). This iterative process added to the depth and quality of data analysis and allowed for drawing inferences and building plausible arguments and interpretations that are supported by the empirical data, thereby safeguarding the validity, trustworthiness, credibility and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Findings

This section presents the findings about employees' feelings and thoughts about and perspectives on their engagement derived from the interviews and focus group data analysis. This section is structured around the characteristics of *Wasta* and Islamic values, ethics and principles and their manifestation in the engagement of employees in the case study hotel. Findings are portrayed in Table 3 and illustrated by quotes from the interview transcripts to provide clearer insights into the engagement phenomenon in the case study organisation.

4.1. Wasta and religious principles and values embedded in the organizational ecosystem

Findings revealed that the concept of *Wasta*-a social network of relationships in which the individual is embedded-was manifested through human connections, social networks and cohesion, interpersonal relationships, relational interconnectedness, collaboration, teamwork and trust and integrated into the organisation's ecosystem. Employees connected their experience of engagement to their work relationship with immediate team members, and their connectedness to their job function, the hotel community and guests. The study revealed that the concept of *Wasta* as well as Islamic values, work ethics and principles were ideologically supported by DestinationDubai hotel leadership and embedded in the hotel's culture, values, work environment and people-management practices. The collaborative, positive work environment, characterised by cooperation (Islamic principle *Shura*) between inter- and intra-department teams in which collegiality thrived, fostered a sense of belongingness and emotional attachment -a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects people across time and space-to the organization (*State Engagement*). The hotel's culture emphasized co-operation in work, participation in consensus-based decision-making and empowerment, in sync with the Islamic principle *Shura*. Findings revealed a close-knit family dynamic, kinship, colleagueship and friendship within the hotel, characteristic of Wasta and the hotel's culture. As one employee stated:

> The culture is a family culture that makes family its foundation

The relational interconnectedness and collaboration evoked a positive orientation, cheerfulness and pleasantness (*State engagement*), as one employees expressed in a spiritual manner:

> A happy heart is a content one where there is no negativity and all positivity.

In addition to the hotel's culture, employees connected engagement to the mission of the organisation, articulated genuinely and authentically by senior leaders: '*Going Beyond The Ordinary*'. This mission implicitly radiates willingness to exert energy in support of the organization, characteristic of *State engagement*. Furthermore, this mission transmits the message of expending one's discretionary effort and exhibiting extra-role behaviour to help the organization succeed (*Behavioural engagement*). This is particularly relevant to the hospitality industry, which by its nature, requires employees to display extraordinary, discretionary effort to ensure service excellence. Employees often went beyond the call of duty in their roles, performing tasks that, strictly speaking, are not part of the formal job requirements. The following quote is illustrative:

Table 3. Arab socio-cultural and religious factors.

Socio-cultural phenomenon *Wasta*	Manifestation in case study hotel Dubai
Powerful sense of group membership and group-orientation and collectivism	Culture, Vision, Values Build interpersonal relationships Positive interpersonal interactions
Emphasizes family connections and the social fabric A social network of relationships (family and kin relationships) in which the individual is embedded: social support and a safety net in time of need, generosity and loyalty	Culture, Vision, Values Supportive work environment Funky and vibrant hotel Clone-knit family dynamic Sense of belongingness and family connection Social climate in the work place connection, communication and collaboration
Helping others in the achievement of a specific goal	Pro-social job behaviour Helping behaviour Responsive to requests for help or guidance Friendly and helpful attitude and helping behaviour towards in-group members Reciprocity between subordinates and their superiors

Islamic values, Islamic work ethics and Islamic principles	Manifestation in case study hotel Dubai
Al-Amanah- trust in relationships leading to accountability	Trust and trustworthiness among employees and leaders Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB)
Al-Sedq - truthfulness (between superiors and subordinates) to the best of one's knowledge leading to honesty and trustworthiness	Connection, collaboration and support Transparency
Adl- fairness and equality in employment relationships justice	**Organizational ecosystem:** Culture, Vision, Values Supportive work environment Psychologically safe workplace Fair treatment Respect from sr. management and peers Respecting the views of subordinates
Etqan- self-improvement which provides the basis for one's striving for self-betterment in order to do better work. This would translate into doing better, work harder and improve the quality of products and services through the learning of new knowledge and skills	Go above and beyond Going beyond the duty of call Thrive in accomplishing goals
Shura consultation, co-operation in work, consensus-based decision-making, social harmony and respect, concern for the wellbeing of employees and society at large	Supportive work environment Psychologically safe workplace Empowerment Workplace humour to cope with stressful and strenuous work Focusing on positive matters in life and work

Most of the jobs require you to work for the role you are applying for, with the occasional ad hoc work that requires people to work together to help make things a success, like having a manager work as a cashier or help greet people for events.

This excerpt illustrates the Islamic values and principles *Shura*-co-operation in work, and *Etqan*-work harder and improve the quality of products and services. It also illustrates the *Wasta* characteristic of helping others in the achievement of a specific goal, that is, success for the team and the business.

Collectively pursuing the hotel's mission resulted in a shared sense of destiny, and a sense of value and significance, also characteristic of *State Engagement*. The collective pursuit of the hotel's mission also resulted in personal identification with the organization (*State engagement*), i.e. the 'oneness' someone feels with the organisation and its values and strategic goals. Pertaining to values, the collection of compelling, unique, unambiguous values of DestinationDubai Hotel guided employees in how to think, act and behave at work, known by the acronym PERFECT:

4.1.1. P: personalized

Personalised means going on a first name basis with everyone, so subordinates call senior leaders by their first name. *Personalised* further means personalising the conversation to evoke cordial social relationships at work.

4.1.2. E: Enthusiastic

Senior leaders expressed that they look for genuine enthusiasm in the organisation and they acknowledged that this depends a lot on them as

leaders, and how they lead, manage, motivate and inspire the teams and ignite enthusiasm. Employees' enthusiasm and drive for achievement comes to the fore in the following excerpt:

> *The enthusiasm I have is, because I want to excel and at the same time have fun.*

4.1.3. R: Respect

DestinationDubai Hotel's leadership imbued respect. As one employee stated:

> *We love and respect each other.*

Employees mentioned that managers respect the views of subordinates. Employees were invigorated by working with people whom they respected and who respected them, evoking engagement.

4.1.4. F: Fun

Fun was a core value intertwined with employees' traits and the hotel's working environment. DestinationDubai Hotel seeks to attract fast-paced, cutting-edge professionals who want to be productive in a distinctly fun and personalized environment. The following excepts are illustrative.

The DestinationDubai Hotel environment is basically like my attitude and personality. So, I am really having fun at work and learning new stuff too.

We work hard, we play hard, we have fun. We are serious about what we create in the hospitality industry, but we create a fun and exciting work environment.

Fun evoked cheerfulness and pleasantness, characteristic of *Trait engagement* as well as positive orientation, mood and emotions, characteristic of *State engagement.*

4.1.5. E: Empowerment

Employees were given authority and responsibility, and they had autonomy in deciding how to do their jobs, taking ownership of issues and having the power to correct anomalies, solve problems and make changes in order to deliver high-quality service. This resonates with the Islamic principle *Etqan*-doing better and improving the quality of products and services. As one senior manager expressed:

> *I am empowered to run the company as my own and we aim to cascade down this ownership concept so that an empowered and engaged workforce is formed.*

4.1.6. C: Commitment

Findings revealed that the organisation has to demonstrate to employees that it is 100% committed to employees so that it can expect 100% commitment back. A senior leader stated:

> *We have a responsibility for the safety and welfare of all of our team members professionally and personally whilst they are with us and that's our commitment to our employees. That is the way that we look at it: give first, then we receive.*

The commitment to the responsibility for the safety and welfare of employees was expressed through a sincere and authentic interest in employees' wellbeing, in synch with the Islamic value and principle *Shura*-concern for the wellbeing of employees. The following excerpt is illustrative:

To me, health and family are most important. The company offers opportunities to improve your personal health and well-being, and also to receive family support and balance work with private health, which is a great thing to have in the organization.

Taking responsibility for the safety and welfare of employees was important in light of the nature of the hospitality industry. Employees underlined that hospitality workers have to focus on guests and their demands in every way possible and place guest demands at the forefront of their duties. This is physically, mentally and emotionally demanding at times, and can take a toll on wellbeing. Therefore, Destination Dubai Hotel had implemented a wellness program to enhance employees' work-life balance physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health and well-being. Examples of social activities as part of the program are Sports Day and 'Mental Health Fairs', events. These activities gave employees the feeling that the hotel cares for and values them, which generated a sense of significance (State engagement). In addition, these activities, combined with wellbeing self-management, created a virtuous cycle of better wellbeing. This, in turn, fuelled increased zeal, positive affect, high level of activation and energy (*Trait engagement)*, which enabled employees to be concentrated and happily engrossed in their work (*State engagement).*

4.1.7. T: Transparency

Senior leaders interact with employees in a transparent manner and there was good approachability of senior leadership. Furthermore, senior leaders encourage open dialogues and communication about challenges, successes, accomplishments and future prospects of the organisation. They inculcated ownership among employees by making them part of the design and implementation of the strategy. Employees indicated that open lines of communication between leadership and employees were imperative for creating good leader−manager relations in order

to meet goals, perform well and be successful. Two employees explained:

One of the values is being transparent and we have transparency in the hotel. We hold regular meetings on how the business is doing. The culture encourages open communication and dialogue. There is also an open-door policy with HR to provide solutions to disputes, encouraging everyone to be present who can come and ask or bring up anything.

> *We are very transparent as a company and we have a rule that if we make a mistake, we have to be honest about it then we have to fix it. We are still one team, so if there is a mistake made as a department, we are responsible and they can come to me at any time, my door is always open.*

The latter excerpt illustrates the manifestation of the Islamic principle *Al-Sedq* − truthfulness, honesty and trustworthiness.

Overall, the embodiment of the hotel's unique 'PERFECT' values by senior leadership endorsed positive affect (*Trait engagement*) of employees who were emotionally attached to the organisation (*State engagement*), and who exhibited Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (*Behavioural engagement*) to make the hotel succeed in the competitive hospitality industry in the UAE.

4.2. Wasta, islamic values and principles and engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic

An emergent finding was that *Wasta* and Islamic values and principles in relation to EE was more pronounced during an exogenous shock and unanticipated, disruptive global macro-event − the COVID-19 pandemic posing disruption, novelty, and criticality to DestinationDubai hotel and its employees. The following excerpts are illustrative:

During the pandemic, can you imagine … We were one of those hotels which never closed during the pandemic. One has to apply all the standards. We had so many challenges. For example, we had guests who were stuck here as airports were shut from March to July 2020. We coped with their challenges and issues and made them feel comfortable, and here we are in 2022.

This excerpt illustrates employees' mental resilience and persistence even in the face of difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic, characteristics of *Trait engagement*. The following excerpt highlights the sense of significance of work, and work centrality-how important work is in people's lives (*State engagement*) during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Especially, it got tough during the COVID-19 pandemic as people got stuck away from home. Guests were staying here away from families. Being fellow

expatriates, the feeling you get to welcome people who are stuck away from home, I feel that it is essential to make them welcome, and so they feel it is like a home away from home, so yes, indeed meaningful and fulfilling work.

This excerpt highlights the *Wasta* characteristic of a social network of relationships in which the individual is embedded, providing social support and a safety net in times of need. DestinationDubai Hotel offered guests a 'home away from home' during the COVID-19 pandemic when guests could not return to their home countries due to travel restrictions. Providing support and a safety net in times of need and safeguarding the safety and wellbeing of their guests during the COVID-19 pandemic resonates with the Islamic principle *Shura* - concern for the wellbeing of society at large.

In sum, findings from this empirical case study research show that the manifestation of EE is influenced by the UAE's religious and socio-cultural context, as well as macro-environmental crisis and exogenous shock events. In addition to the cultural phenomenon *Wasta*, the organisational culture, the nurturing organizational ecosystem and the positive supportive, amicable, equitable work environment resulted in enthusiastic, energetic employees who were happily engrossed in their work and who were willing to expend their extraordinary discretionary efforts to deliver a high standard of service excellence, to create positive customer experiences that yield guest satisfaction and loyalty, required for the hotel to succeed in the competitive hospitality industry in the UAE.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to explore EE in the hospitality industry in an under-researched geographic location, the UAE, embedded in the country's societal, institutional and cultural contexts. The research question that guided this inquiry was:

RQ: What is the role of institutional, sociocultural factors and religious values and principles in Employee Engagement in the Hospitality Industry in Dubai?

We endeavoured to answer this question through an exploratory, qualitative case study in a hotel in Dubai. In response to the research question, a novel finding of this study was that the social-cultural concept *Wasta* (cf. Ali & Weir, 2020; Alsarhan et al., 2021; Hofstede, 2001) and Islamic values, work ethics and principles in the Middle East (cf. Branine & Pollard, 2010; Rokhman, 2010; Yousef, 2001) appears to have an influential role in organisational practice in the case study hotel in Dubai. Specifically, the emphasis on commitment (one of the hotel's values)

to underline the essence of work is in concordance with Islamic principles pronounced in the *Quran* (cf. Abu Bakar et al., 2018; Pickthall, 2001).

The hotel workers showed commitment to attaining individual, team and organizational goals and had the desire to see the organization succeed (characteristic of *State engagement)*, in line with findings by Chandani et al. (2016), Gifford and Young (2021), Robbins and Judge (2022), Osam et al. (2021). Evident from the findings was an organizational culture of support and transparency, and tolerance of differences, the latter being characteristic of the UAE culture (cf. Baruch & Forstenlechner, 2017; Singh et al., 2021). In line with the Islamic principle *Adl*, employees were treated equally and justly and with fairness, dignity and respect, regardless of job level, ethnicity, or sociocultural background. This fostered engagement, in line with findings by Chandani et al. (2016), Fisher (2014), Macey et al. (2009), Onsøyen et al. (2009). Resonating the Islamic principles *Al-Amanah and Al-Sedq*, there was truthfulness between superiors and subordinates and trust and trustworthiness. This reverberates with trust as a central aspect of *Wasta* (AlHussan & Al-Husan, 2022; Horak, 2022). Support and concern for employee health and wellbeing (Islamic value *Shura)* was manifested through wellbeing policies and practices that promoted physical and psychological detachment from work and off-work recovery, important to engagement, resonating with the findings of Gifford and Young (2021)*.* The Islamic value *Shura* manisfted by hotel leadership and employees became prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Concern for employees' and guests' physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing as well as a positive mindset revolving around high energy, resilience, dedication and enthusiasm at work enhanced EE, in line with the findings of Hakim et al. (2022).

In search for understanding what generates positive psychological, physical and emotional states at work (*Trait engagement and State engagement*) and what makes employees flourish at work, the premise of Positive Psychology and Positive Organizational Scholarship (Macey et al., 2009; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Robbins & Judge, 2022), this study found that engagement of the hotel workers was rooted in the hotel's positive, supportive, collaborative work environment and respectful, inclusive work climate in which employees viewed themselves as interrelated. In this positive work environment, employees established human connections and positive relations with colleagues and guests and displayed helpful and service-oriented behaviours to others (cf. Cropanzano &

Wright, 2001), characteristic of *Behavioural engagement*. Such behaviour is called 'pro-social job behaviour 'and ''helping behaviour'', defined as an affiliate-promoting behaviour directed towards improving relationships at work and focusing on harmony between employees'' (Raub, 2008). An explanation for the manifestation of this pro-social job behaviour and ''helping behaviour'' is group orientation, group membership and collectivism, characteristic of the sociocultural context of the UAE (cf. Budhwar et al., 2019; Hofstede, 2001; Mellahi & Budhwar, 2006; Singh et al., 2021). Employees considered their colleagues from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds as in-group members and they expressed they could depend upon them whenever the need arises. Employees' helping behaviour is characteristic of *Wasta*, emanating from co-workers' strong ties and network cohesion, based on shared values and behavioural norms within the hotel. This increased employees availability and willingness to help each other without the need for direct repayment. The kindness and helpfulness was perceived as engaging to the colleagues on the receiving end. This helping behaviour shows commitment to relationships and exudes the ideals of altruism and norms of reciprocity, characteristic of *Wasta* (cf. Horak, 2022). The ensuing reciprocal action of co-workers cultivated reciprocity of mutual benefit, and enhanced their social cohesion, in line with findings by Ali and Weir (2020). Reciprocity also generated a social return in the form of good interpersonal harmony and supportive, trusting, familial co-worker relationships with team members in the hotel. This is characteristic of collectivist cultures, such as the Arab culture (Abu Bakar et al., 2018). Collectively, these findings show the pragmatic legitimacy and pragmatic sense of Wasta as a beneficial practice for the group.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the literature *first*, by filling a gap in empirical research on EE in the hospitality industry in an under-researched setting, namely the Gulf region in the Middle East, using the case of the UAE as a country and Dubai, as one of the 7 Emirates, as an illustrative locale. As such, the study has created context-specific knowledge on the engagement construct in an under-researched geographical setting, the UAE. *Second,* this study strengthens the body of knowledge by positioning EE in a nomological net of connections between national institutional and socio-cultural factors and religious principles and values to

advance our understanding in a holistic way of the role these factors play in EE in the Hospitality Industry in the UAE. Specifically, this study shows how the cultural phenomenon Wasta as well as Islamic principles and values in an Arab country, the UAE, play a role in the manifestation of engagement of employees in the hospitality industry. The role of Wasta and Islamic principles and values in EE became profoundly manifest during the COVID-19 pandemic, a macro-environmental crisis event that brought to the fore the characteristic of *Trait engagement*-mental resilience and persistence even in the face of difficulties. *Third,* by exploring *Trait, State and Behavioural* engagement through the theoretical lenses of Positive Psychology (Luthans, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and Positive Organizational Scholarship (Robbins & Judge, 2022), this study has shown that a positive work environment in the hotel, typified by a powerful sense of group membership and group-orientation and collectivism, characteristic of *Wasta*, and a strong organizational culture and norms tuned to the Arab socio-cultural context and Islamic values and principles, facilitated employees to flourish and become engaged.

5.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

The first limitation is that this study took place in one country in a peripheral geo-location, namely the Arabian Gulf. The purposive sample of employees from one organisation in the hospitality industry in Dubai, the UAE, only permits theoretical and analytic generalisation, i.e. generalisation only to theory and not to a broader population (Eisenhardt, 1989; Flick, 2018), such as employee populations in other organisations in the hospitality industry in other GCC countries, even though they share common socio-cultural characteristics and employ equally sizeable expatriate workers. Therefore, a suggestion for future research is cross-country comparative research that extends this study by focusing on cross-national validation of EE theory in other peripheral locations in the Arab Gulf Region. Specifically, our study calls for more research on EE in the hospitality industry in the wider Arab Gulf region, adopting an emic approach to unravel the role of national, institutional, socio-cultural and religious contexts in EE.

The second limitation is that this study did not use alternative, novel methods of data collection, such as workplace diaries to capture engagement experiences, which is gaining traction (Shuck, 2020). Future research that utilizes such an alternative data collection approach may yield new insights to establish how institutional and socio-cultural factors and religious values and principles differentially influence EE in various Gulf countries.

In conclusion, continued evolution of the construct through contextually embedded research is encouraged to provide more conceptual clarity on what constitutes and drives engagement.

5.3. Managerial implications

This study has several implications for organizations in the hospitality industry in the UAE and other GCC countries of the Arab Middle East with diverse, multicultural expatriate workforces to fill their talent shortages. This study helps leaders, particularly those who are unfamiliar with the socio-cultural and institutional context of the countries in which they operate, to understand the role that Wasta and Islamic values and principles play in EE. Consecutively, leaders should collate engagement into a holistic people engagement strategy and implement evidence-based engagement practices tuned to the socio-cultural and institutional context of the UAE. The conceptualization and attributes of *Trait, State, Behavioural engagement,* depicted in Table 1, help leaders to focus on specific attributes of engagement and accordingly implement research-informed, evidence-based practices to enhance positive affect, cognition and behaviour of employees, resulting in positive human/social outcomes and organizational sustainability outcomes.

6. Conclusion

The case study Action Research presented in this paper explored the role of institutional and socio-cultural context and religious values and principles in EE in a hotel in Dubai. Utilizing Positive Psychology, Positive Organizational Scholarship and Engagement theory as theoretical lenses, our qualitative research unravelled how *Trait, State and Behavioural engagement* are manifested in the case study hotel, embedded in the socio-cultural and institutional context of the Arab Gulf region and influenced by exogenous shock events. Organizations in the hospitality industry that succeed in creating a positive, supportive organizational culture and work environment in which human beings can thrive, experience good wellbeing and are treated with respect are more likely to engage their employees and build and strengthen competitive advantage in the dynamic, rapidly developing, competitive hospitality industry in the UAE and across the world.

Ethics statement

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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