The Effects of Fun and Organizational Culture on Employee Engagement

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Abstract

Workplace fun is intended to bring cheer and joviality to employees' daily work-related interactions. Because of its uplifting nature, fun is prevalent in numerous organizations and is sometimes used to increase employee engagement. However, little is known about the effects of workplace fun within the organization's culture. Organizational culture is important because most outcomes, such as engagement, are positioned within this context. Cameron and Quinn's (2005) competing values framework highlights the importance and power of the organization's culture on processes and events within the organization. The purpose of this study is to examine how workplace fun and organizational culture affect employee engagement with a focus on the mediating roles of the two dimensions of organizational culture underlying the competing values framework (Quinn and Rohrbaugh, 1983): focus and structure. We posit that both workplace fun and organizational culture have a main effect on employee engagement and explore whether organizational culture has more complex influences on the relationship between workplace fun on employee engagement. The results indicated that workplace fun and more flexible, externally focused cultures have a significant effect on employee engagement. The results also revealed that having a flexible culture partially mediated the effect of fun on engagement. Interpretations of the findings in relation to significant workplace fun literature are presented. Implications for theory, research, and practice are discussed.

Keywords: workplace fun, employee engagement, organizational culture

Introduction

Organizational leaders have dedicated considerable time and financial resources toward implementing initiatives intended to foster a fun work environment (Ford et al., 2003; Ford et al., 2004, Lajeunesse, 2013). Workplace fun is thought to be a tool that managers and leaders can use to promote and facilitate employee productivity and other positive work outcomes. Many organizations proudly assert their status as fun-filled workplaces, further emphasizing the significance of fostering an enjoyable work environment. The concept of workplace fun is not new but instead has been woven into the fabric of the workplace setting since early efforts to actively manage the work environment.

One potential explanation for the longevity of workplace fun may be its association with employee engagement. Intuitively, it seems that individuals

experiencing higher levels of fun and enjoyment at work ought to experience greater employee engagement. The empirical literature offers substantial evidence in support of the fun – engagement relationship. A plethora of research has found workplace fun to be strongly and positively associated with employee engagement (e.g., Becker & Tews, 2016; Fluegge-Wold, 2014; Jamaludin et al., 2016; Müceldili & Erdil, 2016; Tsaur et al., 2019; Vijay & Vazirani, 2011). For example, Weiss and Cropanzano's (1996) suggest that workplace fun increases employee engagement by increasing positive affect through fun experiences at work.

On the other hand, a substantial body of empirical evidence suggests that fun in the workplace may have negligible or even detrimental impact on employee engagement (e.g., Fleming, 2005; Michel et al., 2019; Müceldili & Erdil, 2016; Plester & Hutchison, 2016). For example, Michel et al. (2019) reported that individuals' perceptions of workplace fun result in a continuum of employee engagement outcomes that range from engagement enhancing to engagement diminishing. While some people seem to enjoy workplace fun activities others react cynically because they believe such activities are artificial and unauthentic attempts to build unity (Fleming, 2005).

We propose that the conflicting findings across studies can be attributed to inadequate consideration of the organization's contextual profile. Our argument is that the concept of fun cannot be considered apart from its context. Thus, an analysis of workplace fun necessitates a concurrent examination of workplace culture because the impact of fun is likely to vary significantly across contextual settings. Underlying beliefs and values embedded in and perpetuated by the organization's culture shape the individual's interpretation of work events (Clancy & Linehan, 2019). Work environment customs and values can make individuals susceptible to specific outcomes from events (Michel et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2017), suggesting that an organization's culture can potentially promote or inhibit positive reactions to events like workplace fun. Thus, organizational culture may be a prominent factor influencing the effectiveness of workplace fun initiatives (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009; Clancy & Linehan, 2019).

We adopt the competing values framework (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983) because of its documented efficacy and extensive validation. Central to this framework are four distinct cultural models, the clan, hierarchy, adhocracy, and market cultures (Cameron & Quinn, 2005). We suggest that the variations in cultural attributes across these cultural types can help to clarify why fun works better for creating employee engagement in some firms than in others. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of workplace fun and organizational culture on employee engagement, examining how cultural dimensions like external focus and flexibility mediate this relationship.

Theoretical Development

Organizations such as Disney, Southwest Airlines, and Google use fun in the workplace primarily as an effort to gain competitive advantage in their efforts to recruit and retain employees. Generally, such firms understand that to effectively promote employee engagement and other outcomes consistent with their recruiting and retention

efforts workplace fun initiatives must be consistent with and supported by the firm's culture. Cameron and Quinn (2005) use the two orthogonal dimensions that underly the competing values framework, focus and structure, to summarize the critical differences across organizational cultures. Focus captures whether the firm is more attentive to the internal task environment or the external operating environment. Structure refers to whether the firm has a more rigid mechanistic structure or a more fluid and flexible organic structure. For expository clarity we refer to these two dimensions as external focus and flexibility, respectively. We suggest that these two attributes of organizational culture may help to clarify why the literature reports conflicting results about the fun – engagement relationship.

Fun and Engagement

The concept of workplace fun has been widely accredited to the research of Peters and Waterman (1982) and Deal and Kennedy (1982) who highlighted the critical effect of an organization's culture on its performance. Their studies found that organizations and their cultures can be influenced and controlled in strategic ways (Owler, Morrison, & Plester, 2010). Deal and Kennedy (1982) explicitly argued that the success of many corporations was due to the intermingling of work and play. As a result of their emphasis on workplace fun, Deal and Kennedy are often credited as the "founding fathers of fun at work" (e.g., Owler et al., 2010, p.339). Other researchers of the time expanded on this sentiment, extending the belief that fun, play, and humor were tools available for managers to positively influence employees and organizational outcomes (e.g., Warren & Fineman, 2007).

Similarly, Weiss & Cropanzano's (1996) affective events theory supports the value proposition of positive affect. Workplace fun is theorized to have a favorable impact on individuals by facilitating positive emotions and increasing positive affect (Michel et al., 2019). This favorable impact includes the relatively new concept of employee engagement. Employee engagement is defined as the collective outcomes of physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Rich et al., 2010). According to Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), workplace fun increases employee engagement by increasing positive affect through fun at work. Several studies have validated workplace fun's significant positive effect on employee engagement (Becker & Tews, 2016; Fluegge-Wolf's, 2014; Müceldili & Erdil, 2016; Tsaur et al., 2019; Vijay & Vazirani, 2011). Based on our review of the workplace fun and engagement literatures, we offer the following hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 1: Workplace fun will have a positive direct effect on employee engagement.*

Culture

Other authors, however, note the complexities of promoting workplace fun to increase employee engagement (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009). Although fun is meant to enhance engagement, many individuals were observed to react negatively to workplace fun initiatives with some going so far as to attempt to escape workplace fun activities (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009). Thus, while workplace fun activities may be meant to

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increase positive affect, such activities result in certain individuals feeling left out, excluded, and ultimately disengaged (Plester & Hutchison, 2016). Some fun activities such as games and dress-up days, for example, often have negative effects on employee engagement (Becker & Tews, 2016). As a result, some organizations have found it counterproductive to use workplace fun as a management tool (Bilginoğlu & Yozgat, 2020).

One plausible explanation for the counterproductive effects of workplace fun is that a poor alignment between workplace fun and the organization's cultural may result in adverse effects. Organizational culture is defined as "shared beliefs and values guiding the thinking and behavioral styles of members" (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988, p. 245). Michel and colleague's (2019) Temporal Appraisal Framework of Fun supports the notion that individuals' perceptions of fun activities inevitably differ across different organizational cultures. We posit that the complexities associated with both positive and negative outcomes can be better understood by incorporating the cultural values of external focus and flexibility which differentiate the organizational cultures identified by Cameron and Quinn (2005).

External Focus. The focus axis of the Competing Values Framework differentiates between an internal and an external orientation. This dimension is represented on the horizontal (X) axis. The negative (left) side of the axis represents a firm's internal focus which is characterized by procedures, integration, and internal development within the organization. Cultures with a high internal focus prioritize maintaining "harmonious internal characteristics," (p. 34). Cultures that lean towards an internal focus are more concerned with integration, stability, consistency, and control. However, this is all done through a distinct concentration of the organization's most valuable asset: its people. Internally focused organizations prioritize clarity and group maintenance.

The positive (right) side of the focus axis presents an externally focused firm which occurs when a firm places greater emphasis on its interactions with the operating environment relative to its emphasis on the task environment. Organizations that are externally focused value external positioning. Cultures with an external focus are more attuned to adapting, competing successfully in the market, and responding to external opportunities and demands. We anticipate that workplace fun will be much more salient to individuals who work in a more controlling and bureaucratic context. Thus, we posit that focus will have both direct and indirect effects as follows:

Hypothesis 2: An externally focused culture will have a direct negative effect on employee engagement.

Hypothesis 3: An externally focused culture mediates the relationship between workplace fun and employee engagement.

Flexibility. The vertical (Y) axis of the competing values framework, labeled as structure by Cameron and Quinn (2005), captures the formal structure of the organization and ranges from a flexible and more organic structure to a more rigid form characterized by greater bureaucratic control mechanisms. The negative (lower) end of

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the spectrum represents complete control and stability. Cultures that emphasize control are defined by stability and order. These organizations focus on consistency, predictability, and efficiency. The decision making is centralized, and the firm operates on standardized procedures. Leaders in a firm with a high emphasis on control emphasize maintaining smooth operations, conformity, and reliability. This culture is structured and formalized. There are clear lines of authority in firms that are high on control.

On the positive (upper) side of the axis is flexibility, which is defined as an organization that prioritizes adaptability and readiness to change. These organizations have a decentralized structure where innovation, creativity, and an entrepreneurial approach are encouraged. Approaches to leadership under a flexible culture are more visionary and supportive. This type of culture promotes individual initiatives, autonomy, and freedom. Flexible cultures are organic and not bound by rigid bureaucracies and traditions.

Both ends of the flexibility continuum can produce highly effective organizations. However, the stability of the control culture may be overly stringent and offer employees little to no autonomy or personal freedoms. Autonomy and personal freedoms are essential in the workplace fun construct (McDowell, 2004). Clancy and Linehan (2019) argued that the appraisal process of fun is dependent upon the level of control the individual has over the fun practice. Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 4: A flexible culture will have a direct positive effect on employee engagement.

Hypothesis 5: A flexible culture mediates the relationship between workplace fun and employee engagement.

The conceptual model of organizational culture's influence on the relationships between workplace fun and employee engagement is presented as Figure 1.

Methods

Population, Sample, Data Collection

The target population for the current study was residents of the United States who were full-time employees. Given the breadth of the intended population we adopted Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk) as a data collection platform. During the data collection process the data were continuously cleaned and analyzed. Oversampling was utilized to gain more a representative sample of the United States workforce population. There were 1,386 complete responses to the survey. After cleaning the data for duplicates, straight-lining, and significant deviations from the average survey response time, 1,272 usable responses remained. A complete description of the full survey protocol is presented by Logan (2022).

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Workplace Fun on Engagement
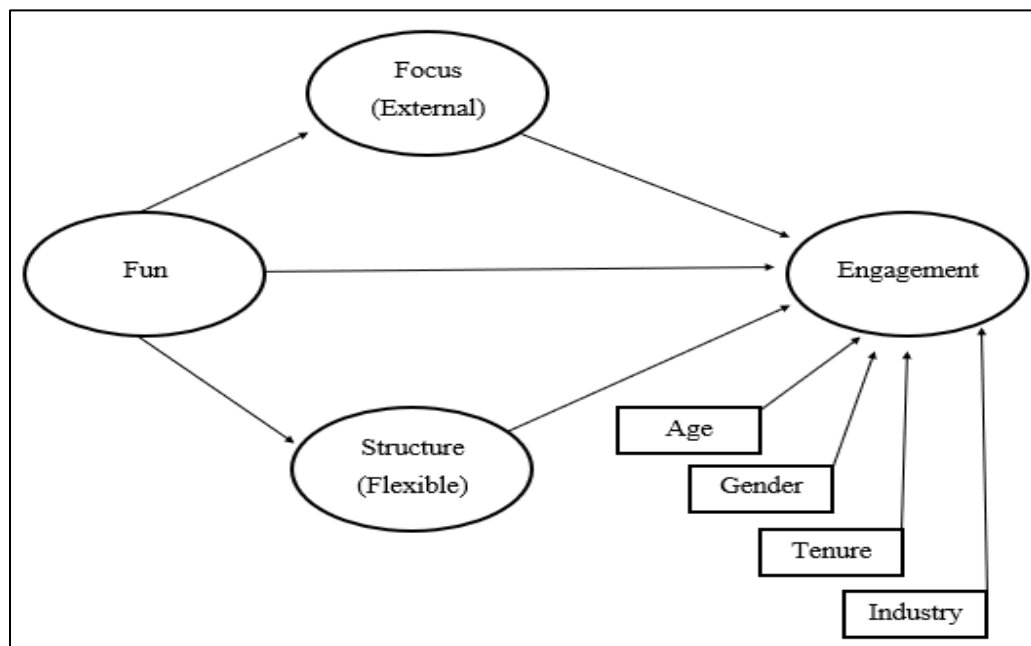
The study's sample demographics are reported in Table 1. The final sample does not provide an exact correspondence between the sample and the target population; there are some statistically significant differences. However, most of these differences are not of a sufficient magnitude to jeopardize the validity of the sample. Two differences, however, do deserve mention. First, the current sample has significantly more education than the population at large. Second, the sample clearly over represents the managerial ranks with 64% of the sample occupying managerial roles. The differences in job level and educational level might be attributable to MTurk's "elite" population (see Ross et al., 2010). Despite the magnitude of these two differences, there are no theoretical grounds to suggest that these differences introduce significant bias into the current work.

Measures

Workplace fun. The Fun at Work Scale (McDowell, 2004) was used to measure workplace fun. The Fun at Work Scale is a 15-item measure of workplace fun consisting of three five-item subscales including: (a) socializing with coworkers, (b) celebrating at work, and (c) global fun at work. A socializing with co-worker's sample item was "camaraderie/friendships at work." A celebrating at work item example was "observing birthdays and other events." A global fun at work sample item was "This is a fun place to work." Each item was scored a 5-point Likert scale. The coefficient alpha was .94 for the total scale.

Table 1: Study Demographics and Population Comparison

Characteristics	US Workforce	Sample	χ2	p	w
Generation			57.99	<.001	0.21
Silent (1928-1945)	1%	1%			
Baby Boomer (1946-1964)	23%	19%			
Gen X (1965-1980)	20%	16%			
Gen Y (1981-1996)	44%	46%			
Gen Z (1997-2012)	12%	18%			
Gender			12.88	<.001	0.1
Male	48%	53%			
Female	52%	47%			
Race			43.75	<.001	0.19
White	77%	83%			
Black	13%	8%			
Asian	6%	6%			
American Indian/Alaska Native	1%	1%			
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	< 1%	<1%			
Two or More Races	2%	2%			
Ethnicity			54.61	<.001	0.21
Not Hispanic or Latino	82%	74%			
Hispanic or Latino	18%	26%			
Job Level			7,592.50	<.001	2.44
Manager	6%	64%			
Non-Manager	94%	36%			
Educational Level			1,232.70	<.001	0.99
< High School	9%	< 1%			
High School Graduate	28%	5%			
Some College (No degree)	16%	10%			
Associate Degree	10%	8%			
Bachelor's Degree	23%	62%			
Advanced Degree	14%	15%			
Tenure			359.83	<.001	0.53
≤ 12 months	22%	7%			
13 to 23 months	7%	8%			
2 to 4 years	24%	32%			
5 to 9 years	19%	34%			
10 to 19 years	18%	14%			
≥20 years	10%	5%			

Notes: Total sample n = 1,272. US workforce demographics taken from the following sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021.

Culture dimensions. External focus and flexibility were assessed using the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI; Cameron & Quinn, 2005) which differentiated the organizational culture dimensions along six subdimensions derived from the competing values framework (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983). The value of each subdimension takes on a unique value in each of the four organizational culture quadrants: (a) clan, (b) hierarchy, (c) market, and (d) adhocracy (Cameron & Quinn, 2005). Sample items include "The organization is a very personal place. It is like an extended family. People seem to share a lot of themselves" and "The organization is a very controlled and structured place. Formal procedures generally govern what people do." In the current work the culture quadrants had consistent internal reliability ranging between .80 to .89. Each firm was located in each quadrant by computing the mean of the six items associated with each of the 4 culture types.

A firm's position in the 2-dimensional Cartesian space that operationalized the competing values framework was then defined as the mean value across the four culture types and located in the culture space using a process similar the process described by Cameron and Quinn (2005). The values of external focus and flexibility were determined by the corresponding location values on the focus and structure dimensions, respectively.

Employee engagement. Employee engagement was measured using the 18 item Job Engagement Scale (Rich et al., 2010). Sample items include: "I work with intensity on my job," and "I am enthusiastic in my job." Cronbach's alpha for the final scale was .93.

Marker variable. The marker variable approach (Lindell & Whitney, 2001) using the CFA analytical technique (Williams et al., 2010) and the Attitudes Towards the Color Blue scale (Miller & Simmering, 2020) as the marker variable was used to assess the threat of common methods bias. Cronbach's alpha for the final scale was .93.

Control variables. Gender, age, tenure and industry were used as control variables. Gender was defined as male and female (see Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Age was denoted by five generational cohorts (silent, baby boomer, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z). The ordinal categories were scored from youngest to oldest on a 1 to 5 scale. Tenure measured individuals' time in the organization from less than a year to 20 years using the ordinal categories presented in Table 1 and scored from youngest to oldest on a 6 point scale. Industry was coded according to the Department of Labor's Industrial Classification Manual as follows: (a) agriculture, forestry, fishing, and mining; (b) construction; (c) manufacturing; (d) transportation, communications, electric, gas, and sanitary services; (e) wholesale trade; (f) retail trade; (g) finance, insurance and real estate; (h) services; and (i) public administration. Gender was dummy coded; male participants were assigned the value "1" while females were assigned "2." The other control variables were dummy coded similarly. Gender and age have been known to predict the level of engagement (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007; Schuller, 2013) and fun has been shown to be somewhat industry specific particularly with respect to service industries such as the hospitality industry.

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Data Analysis

Advanced statistical techniques via SPSS and Amos 26 were employed to explore the intricate relationships between workplace fun, organizational culture, and employee engagement. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was used to validate the measurement models. Common Method Variance (CMV) was assessed using the CFA marker variable technique to control for potential common method bias in data collection. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) allowed for a comprehensive examination of both direct and indirect effects. These approaches provided robust insights into our study and allowed the testing of the study's hypotheses.

Results

Measurement Models

The statistical assumptions of the study associated with SEM analysis were assessed and confirmed. Outliers were determined by evaluating the squared Mahalanobis distance (D2; see Kline, 2016). Based on Kline's (2016) criterion, five observations were removed. Following Schumacker and Lomax (2016), the data were fit to a measurement model prior to testing alternative models. Item scores were used as manifest indicators for organizational focus and structure (see Hair et al., 2010). In assessing the measurement model, all factors were allowed to correlate (four-factor correlated model; see Schumacker & Lomax, 2016; Thompson, 2003). The four factor model resulted in a decent fit ($\chi2 = 3,699$, df = 557, p <.001). The SRMR was at the desirable level of .05. (More complete analytical details are provided in Logan, 2022).

CMV was assessed using the CFA marker variable technique presented by Williams and associates (2010). The retained measurement model was tested to assess the presence of CMV. Overall, five models were tested as suggested by Williams et al. (2010). The analysis indicated some evidence of common method variance. However, it was not consistent across all variables and did not sufficiently bias estimates of the relationships among any of the substantive variables to threaten the validity of our research conclusions (Doty & Glick, 1998). Therefore, the data were considered sufficiently unbiased to proceed.

Zero Order Correlations

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among constructs are presented in Table 2. Consistent with hypothesis 1, fun and engagement are strongly and positively related (r = .55, p < .05). Not surprisingly, a flexible culture and workplace fun are also moderately and positively related (r = .36, p < .05). Consistent with hypothesis 2, engagement and external focus were negatively related (r = -.06, p < .05), which suggests that when cultures are more externally focused, engagement decreases slightly. Finally, the bivariate relationship between flexibility and employee engagement seem to provide initial support for hypothesis 4 (r = .17, p < .05). These initial results are encouraging, and support a more in-depth examination using SEM.

Table 2: Zero Order Correlations

	Mean	SD	FUN	ENG	External Focus	Flexibility	Gender	Age	Industry	Tenure
FUN	3.56	0.80								
ENG	4.03	0.61	0.55**							
External Focus	-0.3	1.09	0.04	-0.06*						
Flexibility	0.08	1.06	0.36**	0.17**	-0.17**					
Gender	1.45	0.50	0.03	0.13**	-0.10**	0.05				
Age	2.38	1.00	-0.025	0.07*	-0.06*	-0.01	0.19**			
Industry	5.11	2.59	-0.27**	-0.04	-0.15**	-0.07**	0.11**	0.05		
Tenure	2.53	1.21	0.12**	0.17**	0.00	0.04	-0.02	0.23**	0.01	
Notes. *p < .05, **p<.01										

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesized direct relationships. Hypothesis 1 predicted a direct relationship between fun and engagement. As reported in Table 3, fun and employee engagement have a significant positive relationship (β = .596, p < .05). Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported. Hypothesis 2 predicted a direct negative relationship between external focus and employee engagement. External focus has a negative and significant relationship with employee engagement (β = -.042, p < .05) providing support for hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 4 predicted a direct positive relationship between flexibility and engagement. Surprisingly, the results indicated that flexibility has a negative and significant relationship with employee engagement (β = -.041, p < .05). Thus, the results for hypothesis 4 are significant but opposite the predicted direction. This unexpected result is addressed later in the discussion.

Mediating Effects. The study also assessed the mediating role of the two organizational culture dimensions (external focus and flexible structure) on the relationship between workplace fun and employee engagement. Hypothesis 3 predicted that external focus would mediate the relationship between fun and engagement. The results reported in Table 3 indicate that this relationship is not significant (β = -.003, t = -1.00, p = .128). Thus hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that flexibility would mediate the role of fun on engagement. The results reveal a significant mediating effect of flexibility on the linkage between fun and engagement (β = -.027, t = -2.08, p < .05). These results support hypothesis 5. Finally, direct effect of fun to engagement remained significant after all variables in the study were included in the analytical model (β = .596, p < .05). These results, presented in Table 3, indicated the case of partial mediation rather than full mediation.

Table 3: Hypothesis Testing Analysis Summary

H	Results	Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		p-value	Conclusion
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
H1	Supported	FUN → ENG	0.596	--------	0.53	0.677	0.005	Direct Effect
H2	Supported	EXT → ENG	-0.042	--------	-0.1	-0.021	0.004	Direct Effect
H3	Not Supported	FUN → EXT → ENG	--------	-0	-0	0.001	0.128	No Mediation
H4	Not Supported	FLEX → ENG	-0.041	--------	-0.1	-0.004	0.026	Direct Effect
H5	Supported	FUN → FLEX → ENG	--------	-0.03	-0.1	-0.003	0.026	Partial Mediation
Notes. FUN = workplace fun. ENG = engagement. EXT = external focus. FLEX = flexibility.								

Figure 2: Structural Model Results
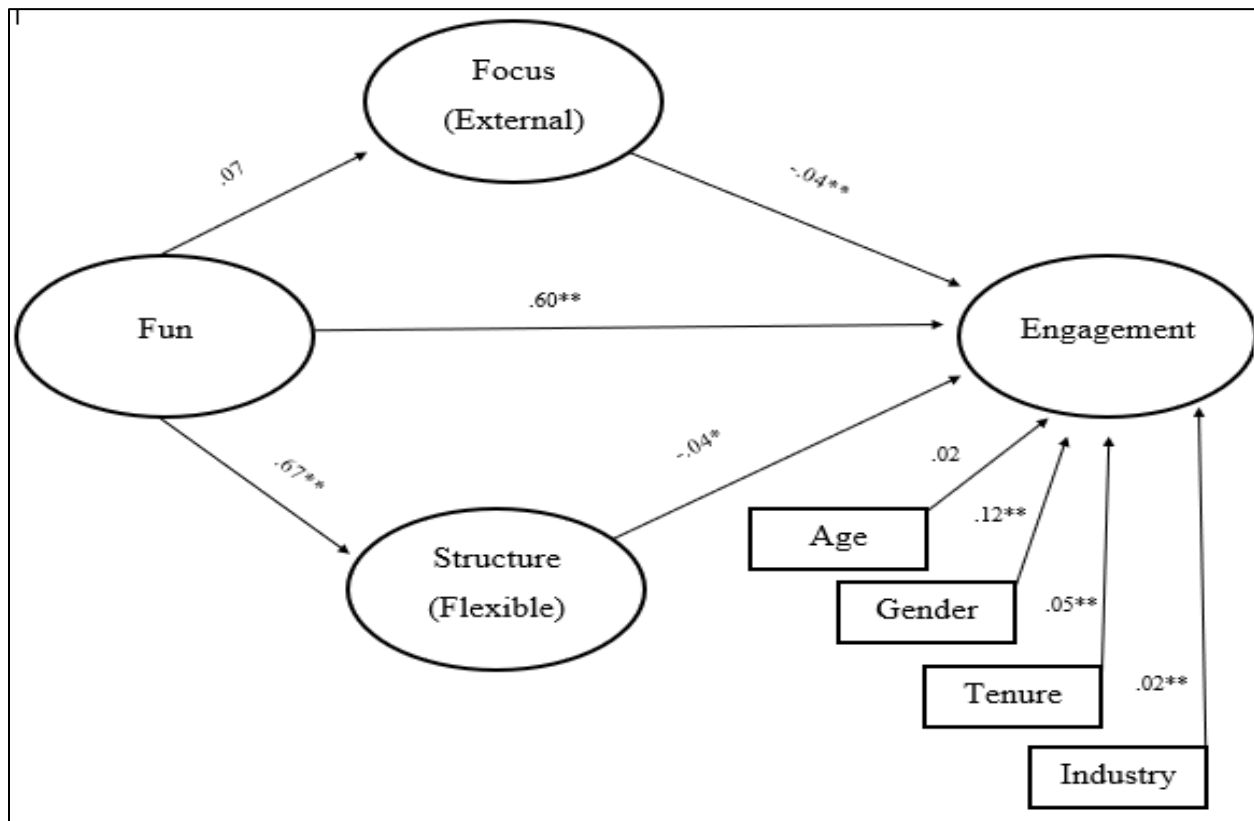
Discussion

The results of the study indicate that workplace fun is positively and strongly associated with engagement. These results were consistent with other studies linking workplace fun to employee engagement. For example, Fluegge-Wolf (2014) found that individuals who had more fun at work tended to have a higher level of engagement (β =.72). Other studies have also reported that workplace fun improved employee engagement (Becker & Tews, 2016; Jamaludin et al., 2016; Müceldili & Erdil, 2016; Tsaur et al., 2019; Vijay & Vazirani, 2011).

We also found that the external focus and flexibility dimensions of culture were negatively associated with engagement. There are several explanations as to why the two culture dimensions slightly reduce employee engagement. This may be because of a misalignment between employee values and preferences and the culture in which they work. Individual personalities and preferences differ greatly and may be mismatched with the specific organizational culture. Additionally, the competing values framework emphasizes culture strength over culture characteristics. Scholars argue that what matters most is the investment in the culture and postulate that strong cultures lead to increased positive organizational outcomes such as engagement (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). However, very defined cultures, whether highly flexible, stringent, internally or externally focused may be perceived as too restrictive to individuals. Some organizational cultures and workplace conditions undermine some individuals' ability to develop (Afrahi et al., 2022). Additionally, organizations with strong cultures may be slow to adapt to change which may lead to frustrations among employees resulting in lower levels of employee engagement.

Flexibility also partially mediated the relationship between workplace fun and engagement. The indirect effect was negative (β = -.027; p < .05). Practically, the indirect effect is small, but the meaning is substantial. This negative value indicates that when fun increases, it leads to certain changes in a flexible culture that actually decrease engagement slightly. This is counterintuitive to the meaning and expectations of workplace fun. The instinctive expectation would be that all aspects of fun and flexible cultures would positively impact engagement. However, this negative indirect effect suggests that there are aspects of a flexible culture, activated by fun, that slightly dampen overall engagement. One potential explanation is that the autonomy associated with self-direction in flexible cultures results in workplace fun initiatives being interpreted as a distraction and even a restriction on personal autonomy when social pressures change such events from "voluntary" to "command performances." A second possibility is that highly engaged employees in more flexible work cultures may be less likely to interpret some planned fun activities, especially managed fun activities such as workplace parties or community meals, as "fun." A third possibility is that more flexible cultures may prioritize individual accomplishments relative to group accomplishments. As a result, employee engagement may be more driven by accomplishing the work at hand than by participating in the social structure and interactions associated with workplace fun. Thus, while this negative mediating effect is relatively small, it should continue to be examined in future research.

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Overall, values and underlying beliefs shape individuals toward achieving organizational outcomes (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). This is inherent in our results. Fun influences engagement both directly and through altering aspects of a flexible culture. The partial mediation indicates that while a flexible culture is an important mechanism through which fun affects engagement, it does not completely account for the relationship.

Implications

Implications for Theory

This study contributes to theory in three distinct ways. First, this research directly investigates the effects of two dimensions of workplace culture as noted by Cameron and Quinn's (2005) seminal work. Few attempts have been made to investigate the competing values model with continuous measures of the orthogonal variables that define the culture space. Instead, most studies employ the four multivariate ideal type cultures which cannot be properly evaluated with the linear logic associated with traditional analytical approaches (Doty & Glick, 1994). Second, the present research contributes to theory by substantiating workplace fun as a construct that is distinct from, albeit related to, organizational culture. Individuals have sometimes misconstrued workplace fun as the organizational culture, noting "fun cultures" in the literature (Fleming, 2005; Hemsath & Yerkes, 1997). This research provides validation for workplace fun as a standalone intermediate construct and clarifies precisely how organizational culture influences workplace fun on engagement. Finally, this may be the first empirical study to substantiate aspects of the Temporal Appraisal Framework of Fun in the workplace constructed by Michel et al. (2019).

Implications for Research

This study advances research on engagement, workplace fun, and organizational culture and contributes to the literature in a multitude of ways. Principally, this study positions workplace fun as a palpable construct. Other studies have explored organizational outcomes associated with workplace fun, but none have explicitly taken workplace fun as a construct capable of manufacturing outcomes. This study places workplace fun in context by clearly presenting how workplace fun can shape individual beliefs and guide individuals to support an organization's desired performance outcomes (see Wang et al., 2017). This is accomplished by building on and expanding Michel et al.'s (2019) theoretical perspective of fun in the workplace. That study offered empirical evidence that logically connected three HR constructs including: (a) workplace fun, (b) employee engagement, and (c) two functions of organizational culture and revealed their relationships. This study also clarifies workplace fun's role in promoting employee engagement. Finally, this study contributes to employee engagement research. Business practices necessitate more positive psychology research on topics such as employee engagement (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019).

Implications for Practice

Practitioners may benefit from the results in several ways. Despite the substantiated benefits from workplace fun, managers and practitioners have not fully embraced workplace fun as a strategic HR tactic (Michel et al., 2019). This study's findings strongly suggest that workplace fun significantly increases employee engagement. This is an important effect upon which practitioners can capitalize.

Workplace fun for employee engagement also has a salient practical relevance in the workplace during the ongoing return to work turmoil. As a result of work arrangements necessitated by the Covid 19 pandemic many employees are continuing to work from home and resisting return-to-work initiatives. Organizations can utilize various forms of workplace fun to engage employees in the social distanced workplace, such as virtual games, virtual challenges, competitions, virtual social interactions, recognition, and acknowledgments (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020). Commitment, communication, development, and strong relationships are the organizational culture values supporting effective COVID-19 engagement efforts (Risley, 2020). The findings of this study offer insight for support of continued virtual workplace fun practices and suggest fun may be a tool to help employees return to work.

In addition, much is to be derived from the mediating effect of flexibility. Although implementing fun in the workplace is generally positive for employee engagement, practitioners should carefully consider the way fun interacts with a company's flexible culture when designing fun activities. Those interested in implementing fun practices are warned to consider this effect in order to optimize their overall impact on engagement through fun. Practitioners are advised to continue implementing fun at work. Workplace fun has a significant effect on engagement outcomes that are worth the resources it takes to implement fun practices.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As is always the case, there are several limitations associated with the study's design. Presenting the research limitations also logically leads to future research directions from a methodological perspective. Perhaps most importantly cross-sectional research designs cannot substantiate causal relationships (Spector, 2019) and are not ideal for investigating mediating effects. Future studies will be more rigorous if longitudinal designs are implemented to replicate and extend the current results.

There is also much skepticism surrounding the data quality from MTurk respondents (Aguinis et al., 2021). Although MTurk offered a reasonable platform to collect data from the target population, the sample was not completely representative of the United States population, especially with respect to the sample's education level and managerial involvement. These differences challenge the ability to generalize the results to the United States working population. Future researchers should explore using alternative crowdsourcing platforms to conduct the research.

Future researchers should also concentrate on other possible influencers of workplace fun's association with engagement as there are still concerns with workplace

fun leading to disengagement, distraction, and dissonance (Müceldili & Erdil, 2016; Plester & Hutchison, 2016). In addition, employees expressed that levels of control and leadership motives shape their workplace fun experience (see Clancy & Linehan, 2019). Therefore, future research could focus on other workplace characteristics that make individuals susceptible to specific outcomes from fun events, including leadership. An in-depth exploration of individuals who experience fun at work is needed to truly grasp the magnitude of the phenomena.

Conclusions

At the broadest level, the current work suggests that workplace fun should continue to be an important topic for both practitioners and academics. As corporate America continues to struggle with the aftershocks of the Covid 19 crisis many firms may need to search for a mechanism to increase the engagement levels not just of remote workers, but also for those employees who may be grudgingly returning to the office. The current work clearly indicates that workplace fun provides a powerful tool to promote engagement, but that the design and implementation of workplace fun initiatives must be conducted within the larger milieu of the firm's context.

In the academic arena, the implications of the current study are somewhat paradoxical. An initial purpose of our work was to clarify why mixed results occur across studies. Instead, we report mixed results within a single study. While unanticipated, such results might provide some guidance to advance our search for clarity. Clearly contextual attributes have a significant effect on the efficacy of using workplace fun to promote employee engagement. However, our results suggest that understanding such complex effects may require complicating both out theoretical understand about how and why such complex relationships occur and the operational and analytical models we use to observe contextual factors such as organizational culture.

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