

Toward the nurturing of a human experience to improve employees' innovation capabilities: the effect of employee experience and emotional engagement

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Received 31 March 2023
Revised 30 July 2023
27 October 2023
4 February 2024
14 June 2024
10 January 2025
20 June 2025
Accepted 9 October 2025

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effect of employee experience, focused on the individual and designed to incorporate all of the psychological needs (trust in supervisor, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging) on employee emotional engagement and, in turn, on employee innovation capabilities, as outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing from the data of 285 Italian employees recruited from a panel, the hypothesized relationships between constructs were tested using structural equation modeling.

Findings – The measurement model results identify and validate the model constructs. The structural model results show that all three components of employee experience – trust in the supervisor, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging – positively and significantly impact employee emotional engagement. Furthermore, the study reveals that employee emotional engagement positively and significantly affects innovation capabilities.

Originality/value – Although previous studies have investigated the effect of top-down human resource practices designed to improve employees' outcomes, this study pioneers the examination of the effect of the employee experience, a bottom-up concept centered around employees and their psychological needs, on employee emotional engagement and of employee emotional engagement on employee innovation capabilities. Findings provide interesting insights for organizations and managers and shed light on the crucial role played by employee experience in improving emotional engagement and boosting innovation capabilities.

Keywords Trust, Psychological meaningfulness, Sense of belonging, Employee experience, Employee engagement, Innovation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In today's global and digital/AI-powered work environment, wherein volatility and uncertainty lead firms to rely more on their resources and capabilities to develop a competitive edge (Huang *et al.*, 2019; Le and Nguyen, 2023; Zirar *et al.*, 2023), it is becoming highly important to identify and assess the factors that will contribute most to the engagement and capabilities of employees to achieve and maintain firms' competitive advantage (Issahaka and Lines, 2021). Employee engagement has become a hot topic in recent years, and employee emotional engagement has emerged as a fundamental factor in the employee–organization relationship, as there is an increasing employee demand for mental and emotional involvement as a source of positive outcomes, such as innovation that, in turn, leads to a sustainable competitive advantage (Imam *et al.*, 2023). First time

defined by Kahn (1990), the employee engagement construct, that is, the extent to which employees commit to their firm, has evolved through time to encompass both employee emotional and intellectual commitment to the firm and the psychological outcomes that lead employees to perform better (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002; Saks, 2006; Lockwood, 2007). By combining the resource-based view (RBV) with the social exchange theory (SET), employee engagement is considered a performance determinant and an innovation driver (Kassa and Tsigu, 2022), as an engaged workforce in innovation activities represents an important human asset that contributes to generating knowledge, enhancing innovation capabilities and achieving competitive advantage (Vidotto *et al.*, 2017) (Ahmed *et al.*, 2018; Ayuso *et al.*, 2011). Creating an engaging working environment is a crucial element in developing innovation capabilities and achieving competitive advantage because it allows employees to increase knowledge, skills, motivation, abilities and experiences useful to develop or improve products or services and bring economic value to their firms (Özbağ *et al.*, 2013; Iqbal *et al.*, 2021). From a knowledge management perspective, recent studies have further emphasized the fundamental role of employee engagement in fostering knowledge-sharing behaviors and enhancing innovation capabilities within firms by highlighting how employee engagement enables learning processes, innovation and knowledge management performance (Atapattu and Huybers, 2022; Kossvya *et al.*, 2024).

Given the importance of employee engagement in improving the firm's ability to create and develop innovation, the extant literature on innovation, human capital and human resource management has mainly focused on understanding how human resource management practices can favor the link between engagement and innovation (Bedarkar and Pandita, 2014; Collings *et al.*, 2018; Sivapragasam and Raya, 2018; Somers *et al.*, 2018). On the one hand, the extant literature has studied the antecedents of employee engagement, such as work-life balance practices, teamwork, job autonomy, job design, supervisory and leadership support and its consequences, such as creativity, cognitive capabilities, career development opportunities and talent retention (Arshi and Rao, 2019; Shujahat *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2023a, 2023b). Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of employee experience and its emotional components (Turner, 2020). In particular, psychological and relational components of employee experience, such as trust in supervisors, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging, have emerged as crucial drivers, calling for further research to deeper analyze the link between employee engagement and its determinants from an emotional and experiential perspective (Barreiro and Treglown, 2020; Imam *et al.*, 2023; Kwon and Kim, 2020).

On the other hand, innovation has emerged to be imperative for firms seeking long-term success; academic scholars and organizations have tried to identify innovation determinants, contextual factors, characteristics and outcomes, often producing incompatible results (Gupta, 2018; Le and Lei, 2019). In this scenario, most studies have used a top-down approach to innovation within firms by analyzing the role played by firm management in triggering, driving and implementing innovation. In contrast, research that considers the role of employees and employee engagement in promoting innovation and improving innovation capabilities within firms through bottom-up strategies such as self-management, individual negotiation and job crafting is still scarce (Segarra-Ciprés *et al.*, 2019).

Despite the growing attention that the topics of employee engagement and innovation have received in the past few years, from a theoretical point of view, several questions remain unanswered regarding the relationship between employee engagement and innovation (Arshi and Rao, 2019; Chukwuma *et al.*, 2019). Within this relationship, the extant literature has treated employee engagement as a unique construct without highlighting the different impacts of its three components (cognitive, emotional and physical) on firms' outcomes (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Arshi and Rao, 2019). Even if the employees' mental and emotional engagement has become fundamental in today's work environment, little is known about the

impact of the emotional facet of employee engagement on employees and organizational outcomes (Imam *et al.*, 2023). The literature on employee engagement as an emotional and psychological process, its antecedents and its critical role in promoting innovation remains relatively disparate and underdeveloped (Rao, 2016). Moreover, from a practical point of view, organizations are struggling to engage and harness employees, underlining the need for human resource professionals to help and support firms to achieve higher levels of employee engagement and capabilities by creating a truly human experience that embeds meaning, identification, belonging and trust into work. In this way, employees can contribute to knowledge development and organizational capabilities development (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Deloitte Insights, 2019; Suh and Wagner, 2017).

In this light, there have been calls for more empirical research that investigates deeper the relationship between employee engagement and innovation, allowing a more accurate examination of employee engagement as an emotional and psychological process and its drivers that are needed to foster employees' innovation capabilities (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Arshi and Rao, 2019; Chukwuma *et al.*, 2019; Gupta, 2018; Issahaka and Lines, 2021; Le and Lei, 2019; Rao, 2016; Suh and Wagner, 2017). In response to this call, the study empirically analyzes the causal relationships between employee experience, focused on the individual and designed to incorporate all of the psychological needs (trust in supervisor, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging) and employee emotional engagement and between employee emotional engagement and employee innovation capabilities.

Drawing from 285 Italian employees recruited from a panel, the study uses structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships between the study's constructs.

The research's theoretical contribution is twofold. First, by adopting an emotional and experiential lens, the study conceptualizes employee experience as a human-centered process and demonstrates the meaningful role of employee experience in driving emotional engagement and, in turn, employee innovation capabilities. In doing so, the study advances the understanding of employee-driven innovation as a bottom-up process and broadens the scope of engagement research beyond traditional productivity and well-being outcomes. More in detail, the study highlights the role of three psychological and relational dimensions of employee experience, namely trust in supervisor, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging, as antecedents to employee emotional engagement that ultimately affects employee innovation capabilities. By adopting employee experience as a bottom-up concept – where processes, places and workflow are designed around employees, the study adds to the extant literature because previous studies mainly focused on the effect of top-down human resource practices on firms' outcomes. With the bottom-up approach, employees can initiate and drive bottom-up strategies and become proactive actors within their workplace, enhancing their emotional ties with their organizations (Björk *et al.*, 2021; Hornung *et al.*, 2010; Vargas and Negro, 2019). Therefore, by embracing a bottom-up approach, this paper contributes to the extant literature by shedding light on the drivers of employee emotional engagement and how they can stimulate innovation capabilities through a meaningful employee experience and, thus, by improving the understanding of the link between employee engagement and innovation.

Second, this empirical research contributes to a better understanding of the employee engagement field by highlighting the crucial role of the emotional dimension of the employee engagement construct as a sub-capability underlying innovation. Emotional engagement has been recognized as a central factor behind employee motivation and success that can contribute effectively to firms' results since an engaged workforce is more loyal and is more likely to go the "extra mile" (Bandura, 2012; Kassa and Tsigu, 2022; Özhan and Kocadere, 2020). The study tries to go beyond existing studies that have focused primarily on the impact of employee engagement as a unique construct without

highlighting the different contributions of its three facets by considering and emphasizing the crucial role played by the emotional aspect of employee engagement (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Arshi and Rao, 2019; Imam *et al.*, 2023; Zigarmi and Nimon, 2011). Therefore, owing to the lack of facet-level studies (Barreiro and Treglown, 2020), the paper extends current knowledge of employee engagement by accounting for the emotional aspect among employees, members of the leadership team and the organization itself as a driver of innovation capabilities. By focusing on the emotional dimension of engagement as a distinct and critical driver of innovation capabilities, this study responds to recent calls for empirical research revealing how engagement, as an emotional and psychological process, significantly influences employees' capabilities and contributes to innovation. In doing this, the paper extends the extant literature by unpacking the emotional dimension of engagement as a dynamic capability in itself. Drawing on the RBV and SET, the study conceptualizes emotional engagement not only as an outcome of a bottom-up employee experience but also as a key driver of employees' innovation capabilities.

The rest of the paper is organized into seven major sections. Presentation of the conceptual framework and research hypotheses is in Section 2; description of the methodology is given in Section 3; presentation of the empirical analysis conducted is presented in Section 4; discussion of the main results and implications for both theory and practice are presented in Section 5 and in Section 6; and finally, conclusions and suggestions for further investigation are presented in Section 7.

2. Literature review and research hypotheses

Organizations are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of human capital development and employees' well-being in achieving and sustaining competitive advantage since employees with high well-being experience more positive mental and emotional states that, in turn, lead to better employees' performances (Dias *et al.*, 2022; Nielsen *et al.*, 2017; Vidotto *et al.*, 2017). According to the resource-based view (RBV), human capital is one of the most important assets of an organization since it allows firms to differentiate themselves and achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Teece *et al.*, 1997; Atapattu and Huybers, 2022). As a resource, human capital contributes to the enduring competitive advantage of an organization by embodying qualities that are valuable, unique and hard to imitate (Shela *et al.*, 2023). In this perspective, through effective employee experiences focused on the psychological and relational components of the employee-organization relationship, employees can enhance their skills, knowledge, motivations and abilities and reinforce their emotional engagement, facilitating the development of organizational capabilities (Omerzel and Gulev, 2011; Imam *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, according to the SET, when human resources perceive that they could benefit from social relationships built on mutual trust within their workplace, they are inclined to return these benefits or behave cooperatively toward the other party (Homans, 1958). In this light, employee experience can be considered as a resource of exchange involving psychological, relational and emotional components, such as trust in supervisors, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging, that contributes to enhancing employees' emotional engagement and their capabilities (Ahmed *et al.*, 2017; Din *et al.*, 2017; Ogbonnaya and Aryee, 2021; Atapattu and Huybers, 2022). Also, employee emotional engagement, in turn, is a resource of exchange that leads to positive outcomes according to the degree to which employees are psychologically and emotionally involved with their organizations (Yin, 2018). From this dual perspective, employee emotional engagement can be conceived as a dynamic capability that emerges from the development of valuable and non-substitutable psychological conditions within the workplace. At the same time, when such engagement is sustained through reciprocal exchanges and organizations are responsive to their employees' psychological needs – such as trust, meaning and belonging, employees – are more likely to commit to their

organizations and contribute to innovation and long-term performance (Barney, 1991; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). According to these arguments, the importance of engaging employees emotionally with their work is leading firms to reframe the relationship between the firm itself and its employees by leveraging employees' experience (Plaskoff, 2017). Employee emotional engagement – a motivational state reflecting how intensely and persistently employees emotionally invest themselves in their roles – has emerged as a crucial factor for business success and results because employees who are emotionally engaged, perceived to be part of an organization, are proud to work for it and are pleased to talk positively of it (Barrick *et al.*, 2015; Del Bosco *et al.*, 2023; Hardaker and Fill, 2005; Rich *et al.*, 2010; Schneider *et al.*, 2018). As a result, emotionally engaged employees are not just there for compensation or promotion; they care about the organization and work to further its goals (Chukwuma *et al.*, 2019). Employee emotional engagement has also been recognized as a key mechanism for translating employees' attitudes and satisfaction into favorable behaviors, reinforcing the significance of affective states in organizational processes (Reina *et al.*, 2018). By capturing the affective experiential state, employee emotional engagement triggers the feelings and interconnections employees have toward their work and the people with whom they interact at work (Kahn, 1990; Rich *et al.*, 2010), leading to a better knowledge development process and sharing and to effective pathways to successfully innovate (Özbağ *et al.*, 2013; Le and Lei, 2019; Iqbal *et al.*, 2021). In this vein, by creating and facilitating effective organizational practices useful to strengthen employee motivation and commitment based on psychological and emotional mechanisms (Fait *et al.*, 2023), employee emotional engagement seems to result in new idea generation, knowledge sharing and new production procedures and approaches development that make firms more competitive (Atapattu and Huybers, 2022). Firms can effectively enhance their innovative behavior by building an engaging environment in which employees can develop enhanced learning capabilities, gain self-esteem, share personal knowledge with other members of the organization and improve their attitudes to ideas (Eisenbart *et al.*, 2023; Luqman *et al.*, 2023). Even if engagement as a construct has three facets, namely physical, cognitive and emotional, that are usually considered simultaneously, recent studies have started to emphasize the importance of the psychological foundations of employee engagement by referring to the emotional facet of the engagement (Soane *et al.*, 2012; Saks and Guruman, 2014; Bedarkar and Pandita, 2014; Reina *et al.*, 2018) and by linking the emotional component with the development of an effective employee experience (Barreiro and Treglown, 2020; Imam *et al.*, 2023; Kwon and Kim, 2020). In a holistic perspective, employee experience “refers to feelings, perceptions, and emotions that employees experience through their involvement in work and within the organizational environment that provides them with positive reinforcement to develop, contribute, engage and retain within the organization for good” (Itam and Ghosh, 2020, p. 41). As it affects employees' cognitive and emotional states, employee experience has to be designed to encompass psychological meaning, sense of belonging and trustworthy relationships that satisfy not only the needs but also the emotions of each employee, directly affecting employee emotional engagement (Plaskoff, 2017; Batat, 2022). Over the years, one of the hardest challenges confronting organizations has been to ensure that when their employees check in every day, they do it not only physically but also mentally and, especially, emotionally (Bedarkar and Pandita, 2014). By creating an emotional and psychological employee experience, employee emotional engagement is associated with extra-role behaviors that go beyond individual roles and lead to innovative behavior (Rao, 2016).

Regarding innovation, employee engagement has been recognized as vital in determining the extent of organizational effectiveness, innovation and competitiveness (Bedarkar and Pandita, 2014).

Despite the significant role of emotional engagement toward business results and innovation (Chukwuma *et al.*, 2019; Črnjar *et al.*, 2020; Saks, 2022), it is urgent to deepen the understanding of the pathways and conditions to improve innovation capabilities

through emotional engagement (Arshi and Rao, 2019; Chukwuma *et al.*, 2019; Gupta, 2018; Le and Lei, 2019). Moreover, combining economic, social and political issues challenges firms' strategies to rethink their employees' experience to improve engagement, innovation and sustainable competitive advantage (Turner, 2019). When constructing employee experience, it is nowadays crucial to satisfy employee psychological needs for breeding and sustaining employees' intrinsic motivation and emotional engagement, including the needs for perceived organizational belonging and support (i.e. perceived uniqueness, acceptance, distal source of support), relationships with supervisors and supervisors' interpersonal style (i.e. trust, proximal source of support), employees' attachment and positive affect to a firm's object, event or situation (i.e. the value of a work goal or purpose, judged about an individual's ideals or standards) (Gillet *et al.*, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Shen *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the present study investigates the effect of employee experience, focused on the individual and designed to incorporate all of the psychological needs, namely trust in the supervisor, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging, on employee emotional engagement and, in turn, on employee innovation capabilities.

2.1 Trust in supervisor and employee emotional engagement

The concept of trust has been defined and conceptualized in many different ways. However, according to Robinson (1996), trust can be defined as "one's expectations, assumptions, or beliefs about the likelihood that another's future actions will be beneficial, favorable, or at least not detrimental to one's interests." This general definition suggests that trust relies on a history of interactions in which an individual evaluates the trustworthiness of another individual, influencing each party's behavior toward the other. Employees' trust in the organization is essential for the employee-organization relationship (Frazier *et al.*, 2015). It depends on inferences from employees' interactions with their supervisor, who is directly responsible for sharing guidelines, practices and goals with employees (Xu *et al.*, 2016). Trust in supervisor refers to the employees' perception of trust in their supervisor and depends on various positive experiences and outcomes, such as job satisfaction, participation, involvement and commitment and supervisor characteristics, such as ability, benevolence and integrity (Frazier *et al.*, 2015; Schoorman *et al.*, 2007; Xiong *et al.*, 2016). Drawing on the RBV and SET theories, trust in supervisors can be conceptualized as a valuable and inimitable intangible resource that enhances the quality of the employee experience. Employees who perceive fair treatment, support and consistency from their supervisors tend to reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviors, including emotional ties in their roles and the organization (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Previous studies have shown that trust in the supervisor can be considered as an important antecedent to employee engagement, as employees who perceive their supervisors as fair and responsible tend to demonstrate greater vigor, dedication and absorption, which fosters reciprocal relationships and encourages knowledge sharing (Chughtai *et al.*, 2015; Le and Nguyen, 2023). When employees experience positive trust in their supervisors, they are more likely to feel confident that the supervisor will help them when they encounter job-related difficulties by strengthening employees' emotional engagement and making employees less susceptible to emotional exhaustion (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007; Tan and Tan, 2000). By affecting firms' styles and philosophies, trust in supervisors enhances employee-centric behaviors that promote positive relationships and employee emotional engagement and, in turn, affect innovation and employee outcomes (Malik *et al.*, 2024; Al Hawamdeh, 2023).

Moreover, in today's fast-changing environment characterized by increased complexity and uncertainty, trust in the supervisor has been identified as one of the most vital components of employees' emotional engagement, as trust directly affects the efficacy and the quality of the cooperation between organizational members (Hsieh and Wang, 2015). Past research has also found that employees who trust their supervisors are affected psychologically and

that this psychological change and desire for their supervisors' approval lead to higher levels of emotional engagement (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Hsieh and Wang, 2015; Maximo *et al.*, 2019). By fostering the emotional link of the employee–organization relationship, organizations can support their employees to experience trust and alignment with their supervisors, as well as allow employees to better identify themselves with the organization they are working for and reinforce their mutual relationships, leading to a stronger emotional engagement.

Therefore, this study hypothesizes as follows:

H1. Trust in supervisor directly and positively affects employee emotional engagement.

2.2 Psychological meaningfulness and employee emotional engagement

From the RBV and the SET theoretical standpoint, psychological meaningfulness can be seen as a unique and inimitable resources that foster long-term engagement. In fact, when employees perceive their work as meaningful and aligned with their personal values, they are more likely to reciprocate with pro-active behavior, reinforcing their emotional bond with the organization (Barney, 1991; Rosso *et al.*, 2010). In this vein, previous studies have recognized that psychological meaningfulness represents a fundamental psychological state at the workplace, as meaningfulness has been defined as the value of work goals evaluated concerning individuals' ideals and, thus, individuals have a main reason to seek meaning in their work (May *et al.*, 2004). Specifically, the experience of psychological meaningfulness refers to the extent to which individuals, particularly employees, derive meaning from their work and feel that they are receiving a return on investments of the self in role performances (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Kahn, 1990). Past research has revealed that positive psychological experiences and work context influence employees' sense of engagement at work (Kahn, 1990; Glavas and Kelley, 2014; May *et al.*, 2004; Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Saks and Guruman, 2014). Psychological meaningfulness is a state that specifically relates to the positive feeling that work is worthwhile, and it represents the strongest predictor of engagement (May *et al.*, 2004). Nowadays, employees are seeking out opportunities for greater psychological meaning because it drives them to acquire and sustain positive distinctness, leads to positive emotions, feelings of shared identities and beliefs and makes employees enter a state of flow characterized by greater engagement, creativity and productivity (Woods and Sofat, 2013; Chaudhary, 2019). By facilitating employees' personal growth and motivation at work, psychological meaningfulness drives the extent to which employees are personally and emotionally engaged with an organization (Binyamin and Brender-Ilan, 2018). A lack of psychological meaningfulness in one's work can lead to alienation or disengagement (Binyamin and Brender-Ilan, 2018; May *et al.*, 2004).

Therefore, this study hypothesizes as follows:

H2. Psychological meaningfulness directly and positively affects employee emotional engagement.

2.3 Sense of belonging and employee emotional engagement

Belonging is an essential human need and a fundamental human motivation that affects human cognition, emotions and behavior (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Malone *et al.*, 2012). Framed within the RBV and the SET, a strong sense of belonging can be considered a complex organizational resource that enhances employee engagement by improving the employee perception of inclusion, recognition and emotional safety as part of their organizational experience (Barney, 1991; Lartey, 2022).

Based on these arguments, the sense of belonging is a personal perception of being an important member of a community (an organization), increasing individuals' participation and effort (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). In this context, being part of an organization can be translated into being more than just an "employee" when on the job (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011). By creating a sense of identification, belonging to a workplace allows employees to freely express their ideas, share competencies and practices, actively participate in achieving goals and build long-lasting relationships with others (Filstad *et al.*, 2019). Feeling a strong sense of belonging to an organization increases employees' willingness to remain in that organization, as well as their commitment and engagement (Han *et al.*, 2010), suggesting that engagement does not just come from the employee. Still, the organization plays a crucial role by supporting employees to perceive themselves as part of a group, a culture or an organization (Lartey, 2022). The sense of belonging can contribute to explaining various motivational and emotional human behaviors because employees who perceive belonging experience positive emotions that directly and positively influence emotional engagement toward their organizations (Okolie *et al.*, 2021). When employees perceive themselves as a part of an organization, their emotional attachment and involvement toward the organization increase, and they show a higher propensity to perform their role enthusiastically. From this perspective, employees with a higher sense of belonging tend to have higher emotional engagement and contribute more effectively to developing innovative ideas (Delima and Sellar, 2022).

Therefore, this study hypothesizes as follows:

H3. Sense of belonging directly and positively affects employee emotional engagement.

2.4 Employee emotional engagement and employee innovation capabilities

Innovation has always been a critical source of firms' competitive advantage. Innovative ideas rely heavily on employees' knowledge, skills and experiences. Given the crucial role played by employees in the development of innovations, previous studies on innovation and its management have demonstrated that firms have to engage with their main internal stakeholders, namely, employees, to provide markets with innovative products or services and achieve superior performance (Ayuso *et al.*, 2011; Sok and O'Cass, 2015). From the RBV perspective, one of the main purposes of firms' human resource systems is to create and develop organizational capabilities that become a source of competitive advantages, such as employees' innovation capabilities (Shipton *et al.*, 2005, 2006; Sung and Choi, 2014; Santoro and Usai, 2018). By stimulating commitment, creativity, emotional ties and proactive behavior of their human capital, firms can engage employees and promote innovation in ways that enhance capabilities and long-term performance (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Ahmed *et al.*, 2018; Kassa and Tsigu, 2022; Vidotto *et al.*, 2017). In this perspective, an adequate human resource system has to achieve a strong engagement from all employees with sophisticated practices and approaches to recruitment, selection, training and performance appraisal, contributing to fostering employees' creativity and capabilities to develop new products, services or processes. Existing literature also states that employee engagement has a precursor role to creativity and innovation in the workplace (Arshi and Rao, 2019).

Additionally, considering employee engagement's role in affecting innovation, employees' emotional and psychological involvement could facilitate creativity, knowledge development and sharing and, in turn, innovation (Hess, 2014). Besides cognitive and physical engagement, emotional engagement, reflecting the feelings and links employees have toward their work and the people with whom they interact at work (Kahn, 1990; Rich *et al.*, 2010), is a crucial dimension in letting employees perform meaningful tasks, improve capabilities and achieve important goals (Reina *et al.*, 2018). Employees emotionally engaged are more loyal to their firms and more likely to go the "extra mile," contributing to

generating positive outcomes not only in terms of customer satisfaction, operational efficiency and revenue growth but also regarding new products, solutions or processes that substantially improve the existing ones (Ayuso *et al.*, 2011; Kassa and Tsigu, 2022). Emotional engagement can thus be considered a foundational mechanism through which firms support the development of employees' capabilities and enhance innovative outcomes. Therefore, this study hypothesizes as follows:

H4. Employee emotional engagement directly and positively affects employee innovation capabilities.

Figure 1 portrays the conceptual model, stating the relationship of each employee experience construct with employee emotional engagement and employee innovation capabilities.

3. Methodology

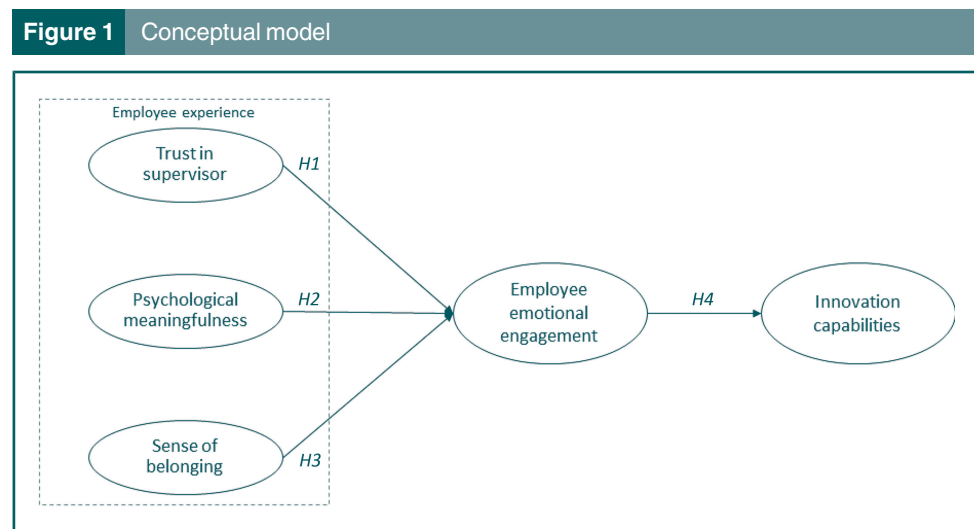
The hypothesized relationships were tested using SEM to assess whether and how the three employee experience constructs identified – trust in supervisor, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging – have a positive effect on employee emotional engagement and, in turn, on employee innovation capabilities.

3.1 Sample and data collection

The study investigates a sample of Italian employees to successfully address the research aim. Italy was chosen as a suitable research setting since, in the last years (i.e. 2018), Italy has registered a huge improvement in employee engagement practices partially attributable to the economic rebound (AON., 2018).

With the COVID-19 pandemic, many Italian employees have reconsidered their relationships with the firms they work for, leading firms to prioritize employee experience to retain talent by strengthening employees' emotional connection and engagement (Forbes, 2022).

Therefore, a sample of Italian employees was recruited from a panel through a digital platform administered by IPSOS, the third-largest global market research company with a community of 18,130 consumers and over 5,000 clients in 90 markets. The Italian panel comprises more than 84,000 balanced individuals and in line with the Italian population's characteristics in terms of age, gender and region of residence.



The choice of this sample pool is consistent with the research aim and makes the research setting appropriate since employees seem to be the people best placed to answer questions about their experience in the workplace, engagement and capabilities.

Within a wave of 4,000 individuals, 554 questionnaires were collected, accounting for a 13.85% response rate. As the study aimed to investigate the effect of employee experience on emotional engagement and innovation capabilities, the respondents who affirmed neither being employees nor being involved in activities that contribute to firms' innovation capabilities were excluded, leading to a final sample of 285 interviewees.

The surveyed employees were asked to self-report their answers on a seven-point Likert scale about their trust in the supervisor and the organization, psychological meaningfulness, sense of belonging, emotional engagement and innovation capabilities. Finally, respondents were asked about standard demographics, such as age, gender, education, income and geographical location. Table 1 shows the sample characteristics.

3.2 Measures

The study uses constructs' items from previous studies; some measures were retrieved from the literature since they already fit with the research context, while others were

Table 1 Sample characteristics

<i>Demographics</i>	N	%
<i>Job title</i>		
Director	21	7.3
Manager	26	9.2
Office worker	174	61.2
Worker	46	16.0
Other	18	6.3
<i>Age</i>		
18–24	32	11.2
25–34	68	23.8
35–44	81	28.5
45–54	54	18.9
>=55	50	17.6
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	148	51.9
Female	107	48.1
<i>Education</i>		
Primary education degree	1	0.5
Lower secondary education degree	14	4.9
Upper secondary school degree	144	50.5
Bachelor's degree	47	16.5
Master's degree	64	22.3
Post-graduate degree	15	5.3
<i>Income</i>		
Far above the average	4	1.4
Above the average	53	18.6
Average	163	57.2
Below the average	47	16.5
Far below the average	18	6.3
<i>Geographical location</i>		
Nord west	76	26.6
Nord east	59	20.7
Center	60	21.1
Sud	90	31.6

adapted to suit the study setting. The trust in supervisor construct was measured using ten scale items (McAllister, 1995; Yang and Mossholder, 2010). This construct refers to the two substantive bases of trust in the supervisor, cognitive and affective and captures the degree of employees' confidence in their supervisor when they encounter job-related difficulties. Concerning the psychological meaningfulness construct, the scale used derives from the definition given by May *et al.* (2004) and Spreitzer (1995) and consists of six items. These items measure the degree to which employees discover meaning in their work-related activities (Kahn, 1990). Three-item scales were used to measure the sense of belonging construct (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011). This scale was adapted to capture the degree of employees' perceived sense of identification with and belonging to an organization or a community of people comprised of cognitive, emotional and evaluative elements. The measurement scale of emotional employee engagement was borrowed from the studies of Kahn (1990) and May *et al.* (2004) and was measured using four items. These items reflect the emotional component of Kahn's (1990) engagement construct and capture the degree of employees' emotional engagement that comprises meaningful connections to others, empathetic experiences and concern for others' feelings.

Finally, the innovation capabilities construct was measured using five scale items, drawing from the studies of Camisón and Villar-López (2014) and Donate *et al.* (2016). The construct was adapted to capture the degree of employees' involvement in both processes and product innovation development during the last three years of their firm's activity.

All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 – Strongly disagree and 7 – Strongly agree).

The items and constructs are listed in [Appendix](#).

3.3 Data analysis

SEM with LISREL 8.80 was performed to test the model and the hypotheses presented in [Figure 1](#), evaluating interrelationships between employee experience constructs – trust in supervisor, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging – employee emotional engagement and innovation capabilities, as outcomes. Additionally, two approaches were used to ensure the robustness of the study's results and minimize the potential for common biased effects. First, by pre-testing the questionnaire, the item statements were clarified to reduce item ambiguity and the items related to the dependent variables were not located near the independent ones. Second, Harman's single-factor test was performed to check if the variance of all items was explained by only one component by loading all items into an exploratory factor analysis and using principal components extraction and an unrotated factor solution (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). No evidence of common method bias was found since Harman's test showed the presence of multiple factors.

4. Results

4.1 Measurement model

Using SPSS and LISREL 8.80, the study estimates Cronbach's alphas (CA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity of each construct (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Jöreskog and Sörbom, 2006).

Concerning reliability, all Cronbach's α values are greater than 0.70 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994), suggesting acceptable reliability of each of the study's constructs.

Referring to the CFA, convergent validity is supported, as all item loadings are greater than the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hair *et al.*, 2013), all the composite reliability (CR) values are higher than the minimum threshold of 0.70 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994) and all the average variance extracted values (AVE) exceed the

recommended threshold of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), except for trust in supervisor and sense of belonging constructs. Trust in supervisor AVE value is 0.437, and sense of belonging AVE value is 0.487 that, according to Fornell and Larcker (1981), both still correspond to acceptable convergent validity for the two constructs.

Moreover, since all AVE values are greater than the squared correlations of the constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), discriminant validity is also supported, confirming the validity of the measurement scales used. Table 2 shows reliability and CFA results.

4.2 Structural model

The fit statistics of the structural model are within acceptable ranges, with χ^2 1334.101; degrees of freedom 343; χ^2/df 3,889; root mean square error of approximation 0.109; comparative fit index 0.939; standardized RMR (SMRM) 0.091. All items load significantly on their assigned latent constructs.

The results from the SEM analysis shown in Table 3 indicate that trust in supervisor positively and significantly impacts employee emotional engagement ($\gamma = 0.487$, $t = 4.953$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H1. Further, the results show that psychological meaningfulness directly and positively affects employee emotional engagement ($\gamma = 0.308$, $t = 3.330$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H2. A significant and positive relationship exists between sense of belonging and employee emotional engagement ($\gamma = 0.145$, $t = 2.589$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H3. Moreover, the findings support H4, showing a positive and significant effect of employee emotional engagement on innovation capabilities ($\beta = 0.744$, $t = 12.153$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, the structural model explains 63.4% of the variance in employee emotional engagement ($R^2 = 0.634$) and 55.4% of that in innovation capabilities ($R^2 = 0.554$) (Figure 2).

5. Discussion

Even if recent studies have examined the effect of human resources practices developed by firms on several issues related to employees' productivity, well-being, overwork, burnout, job satisfaction and employee commitment (Collings et al., 2018; Sivapragasam and Raya, 2018; Somers et al., 2018), a research area that remains under-investigated is how employee experience and employee engagement affect innovation and innovation

Table 2 Reliability and CFA results

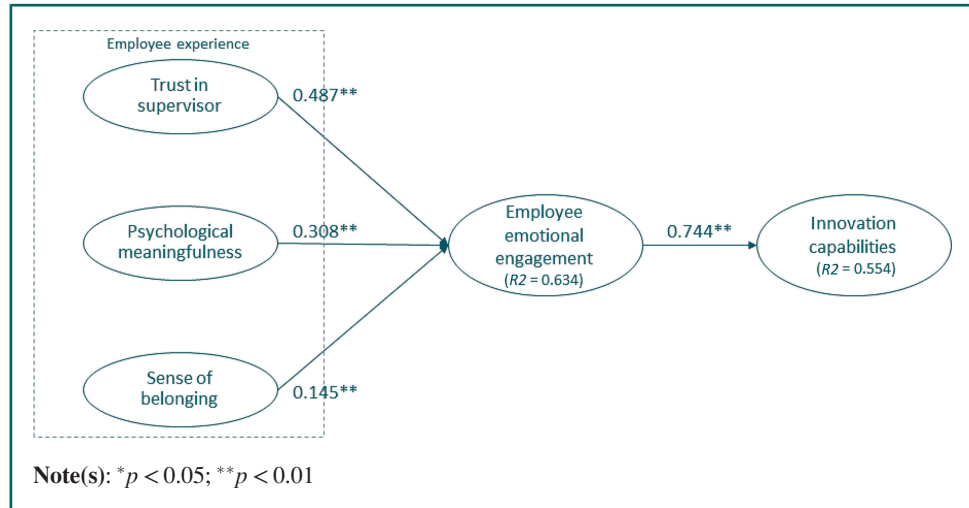
Constructs	α	CR	AVE
Trust in supervisor	0.881	0.884	0.437
Psychological meaningfulness	0.853	0.857	0.501
Sense of belonging	0.716	0.735	0.487
Employee emotional engagement	0.915	0.913	0.724
Employee innovation capabilities	0.879	0.885	0.609

Table 3 Structural relationships and hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Path	Completely Std β and γ	t value	Decision
H1(+)	Trust in supervisor → Employee emotional engagement	0.487	4.953**	Supported
H2(+)	Psychological meaningfulness → Employee emotional engagement	0.308	3.330**	Supported
H3(+)	Sense of belonging → Employee emotional engagement	0.145	2.589**	Supported
H4(+)	Employee emotional engagement → innovation capabilities	0.744	12.153**	Supported

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Figure 2 Structural model



capabilities (Arshi and Rao, 2019; Bhatti *et al.*, 2021; Chukwuma *et al.*, 2019). In this line, both theory and practices have highlighted the need for human resource professionals to help and support employees to achieve high levels of emotional engagement, as the employees' emotional and intellectual commitment to the organization can effectively and directly contribute to positive outcomes such as customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, revenue growth and innovation (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Deloitte Insights, 2019; Kassa and Tsigu, 2022). Employees' emotional engagement as a psychological state has strong interconnections with employees' experience. Living positive and exciting experiences within the workplace context leads employees to attribute emotional meaning to experiences themselves that, in turn, positively impact emotional engagement (Lemon, 2019). Drawing on RBV, firms could benefit from both the creation of an employee experience by making work meaningful and giving people a sense of belonging, trust and relationship and the achievement of employees' emotional engagement allowing the development of employees' capabilities that become sources of competitive advantage (Ayuso *et al.*, 2011; Gillet *et al.*, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Shen *et al.*, 2022). An engaged human capital is more likely to actively participate in innovation processes and contribute to the development, sharing and dissemination of knowledge within the firm useful to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Özbağ *et al.*, 2013; Iqbal *et al.*, 2021; Atapattu and Huybers, 2022). Along with this idea, the objective of this research is to examine the link between employee experience, focused on the individual and designed to incorporate all of the psychological needs (trust in supervisor, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging) and employee emotional engagement and, in turn, employee innovation capabilities.

The findings suggest that employee experience enhances the employee's emotional engagement, stressing some of the SET principles. In fact, by providing a better employee experience focused on psychological and relational components, firms have the opportunity to strengthen the employee-organization relationship by leveraging employees' trust in their supervisor, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging as resources of exchange (Ahmed *et al.*, 2017; Din *et al.*, 2017; Ogbonnaya and Aryee, 2021; Atapattu and Huybers, 2022). In this perspective, the study's results show that the three components of employee experience and, in particular, trust in supervisor and psychological meaningfulness positively influence employee emotional engagement and employee innovation capabilities, confirming that the firm's ability to produce new products,

services or processes is inevitably linked to how the firm brings employees to live an experience in the workplace and engages with them.

Regarding the effect of trust in supervisor and employees' emotional engagement, the study's results are consistent with previous research, which also established that trust between leaders and subordinates is a predictor of engagement within the context of the workplace (Chughtai *et al.*, 2015; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007; Tan and Tan, 2000; Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Hsieh and Wang, 2015; Maximo *et al.*, 2019). However, by focusing on the emotional facet of the employee engagement construct, the evidence from this study advances the previous one by indicating that trust in a supervisor is significantly related to the employees' emotional engagement and by emphasizing that trust is related to key organizational and workplace behaviors and attitudes (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002) even in an emotional perspective. When employees trust their supervisors engage more in their work, especially from an emotional perspective because, according to SET, the relationship between employees and supervisors is based on a dyadic and reciprocal concern and emotional and affective sharing (Hsieh and Wang, 2015). Regarding employee experience, the findings also show that psychological meaningfulness positively affects employees' emotional engagement. Only a few studies have tried to empirically analyze the psychological conditions of meaningfulness as antecedents of employee engagement, and they have treated employee engagement as a unique construct without considering the emotional facet (Chaudhary, 2019; May *et al.*, 2004). Due to the increasing employee demand for mental and emotional involvement, the present study has analyzed the relationship between psychological meaningfulness and employees' emotional engagement since a greater sense of psychological meaningfulness represents an important resource that will improve employees' availability to engage in their job and work roles not only from a cognitive but also, more importantly, from an emotional perspective. This is because the psychological conditions of meaningfulness lead employees to demonstrate and enact their care for the organization, helping it achieve its goals and objectives (Saks, 2022). Moreover, the study's findings suggest that the experience of being part of something – the sense of belonging to an organization – significantly contributes to engaging employees through an emotional lens. This finding corroborates the extant literature that suggests that employees who feel personally accepted, respected, included, supported and part of something are more likely to emotionally engage with their organization (Filstad *et al.*, 2019; Okolie *et al.*, 2021; Lartey, 2022). In the workplace, the sense of belonging relates to gaining acceptance by being part of a particular group/organization and learning and feeling psychological ownership toward organizational behaviors. By developing positive feelings and responsibility, the sense of belonging influences emotions and increases emotional engagement and the chance of best outcomes in terms of competitive advantage (Ghafoor *et al.*, 2011). Finally, the study's evidence has found a positive and direct connection between employees' emotional engagement and employees' innovation capabilities. Similarly, the extant literature has revealed that a high level of engagement leads to greater innovation, suggesting a close relationship between engagement and innovation (Kassa and Tsigu, 2022). Strengthening employees' innovation capabilities is considered fundamental to achieving a firm's results and success (Le and Lei, 2019; Arshi and Rao, 2019; Langelaan *et al.*, 2006; Abraham, 2012; Slatten and Mehmetoglu, 2011; Gichohi, 2014), the current study furthers previous one by revealing the crucial role of emotional engagement in enhancing innovation capabilities suggesting that emotional engagement as the affective facet of the employee engagement construct is an essential ingredient for creativity and innovation in the workplace. Being emotionally engaged leads employees to go beyond their work role and be fully immersed in their jobs by improving positive results, particularly innovative behaviors and business success.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical contribution

From a theoretical point of view, this study contributes to the academic literature in two ways. First, this study answers the call for a better understanding of the antecedents of employee engagement by shedding light on the link between employee engagement and its determinants from an emotional and experiential perspective. Even if it has emerged that the psychological and relational components of employee experience are crucial factors in understanding the intricate dynamics of employee emotional engagement, a clear understanding of the relationship between these two concepts is still lacking (Barreiro and Treglown, 2020; Imam *et al.*, 2023; Kwon and Kim, 2020). In this perspective, the study constitutes an important step forward in understanding the role played by three different components of employee experience in enhancing employee emotional engagement by considering psychological and relational drivers such as trust in supervisors, psychological meaningfulness and sense of belonging. In fact, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is a first attempt to empirically investigate whether and how the creation of an employee experience, as a true human, individual experience that embeds psychological needs and meaning into work, contributes to employee emotional engagement and, in turn, to employee innovation capabilities. To create and maintain a competitive advantage and given the close connection between employees and the firm's ability to innovate, firms need to improve what is often called in practice the employee experience, a bottom-up concept – where processes, places and workflow are designed around employees (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Suh and Wagner, 2017; Deloitte Insights, 2019). In this perspective, the study's findings contribute to shedding light on the relationship between employee emotional engagement and innovation by suggesting that employee experience and emotional engagement may sustain employees' favorable behaviors within the workplace, as employee-driven innovation is a bottom-up process (Segarra-Ciprés *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this study represents an advancement of previous studies that have mainly focused on the effect of top-down human resource practices designed to improve employees' productivity, well-being, overwork, burnout, job satisfaction and employee commitment (Collings *et al.*, 2018; Sivapragasam and Raya, 2018; Somers *et al.*, 2018).

Second, the study tries to go beyond existing studies that have focused primarily on the impact of employee engagement as a unique construct without highlighting the different contributions of its three facets by considering and emphasizing the crucial role played by the emotional aspect of employee engagement. The empirical results show that emotional engagement with employees affects employees' innovation capabilities, confirming that employee emotional engagement represents a fundamental dimension in letting employees perform meaningful tasks and improve their capabilities. By reflecting on the feelings and links employees have toward their work and the people they interact with (Ayuso *et al.*, 2011; Kahn, 1990; Rich *et al.*, 2010), employee emotional engagement can thus be defined as a sub-capability underlying innovation. In this light, the study furthers the extant literature by focusing on the emotional facet of the employee engagement construct (Zigarmi and Nimon, 2011; Imam *et al.*, 2023) and recognizing that employees' emotional engagement plays a central role in influencing employee motivation and success (Bandura, 2012; Özhan and Kocadere, 2020). Therefore, the study answers the call for further empirical studies to uncover whether and how employee engagement as an emotional and psychological process and its antecedents may effectively and directly affect the promotion of innovation and the improvement of employees' innovation capabilities through human capital, knowledge development process, knowledge sharing and creativity (Kassa and Tsigu, 2022; Le and Lei, 2019; Rao, 2016).

6.2 Practical implications

Beyond theoretical contributions, this research offers practical implications for firms seeking to be innovative and optimize their human resource systems by creating an employee

experience and achieving higher levels of employee engagement. It highlights the importance of employee experience and, in particular, of psychological meaningfulness, trust in the supervisor and sense of belonging in improving employee engagement and, in turn, fostering employee innovation capabilities. The study's empirical evidence indicates that adopting a more bottom-up approach is effective, allowing employees to take the lead in initiating and driving strategies while becoming proactive participants in their workplace and strengthening their emotional connections with their organizations.

In this vein, the study provides useful managerial insights into establishing a successful employee experience by suggesting to focus most on psychological and emotional factors. In fact, a human experience centered around employees' psychological needs is key to improving emotional engagement. It creates and reinforces identification, trust, interactions and ties between employees and the organization. Creating an employee experience as a human, individual experience could carry a human dynamic affecting the firm's ability to achieve engagement and produce innovation. Thus, organizations should pay attention to developing an authentic employee experience. Accordingly, managers should increase perceptions of their trustworthiness and, at the same time, try to improve the emotional attachment employees feel toward an organization and to create a sense of identification and belonging to a workplace through engaging activities. To foster trust in supervisors, a sense of belonging and the psychological meaningfulness of employees in a positive manner, loyalty, commitment, transparency, internal communication, knowledge sharing and the willingness to take risks should be the fundamental characteristics of the firm and the firm's members. Therefore, managers must deal with and equip their firm with emotional intelligence as an essential skill. To do this, firms should develop human resource practices that include training and communication programs on respect, mindful detachment and empathy to improve employee emotional engagement.

Moreover, organizations and managers could help and support employees in developing innovation capabilities through human resource practices that promote engagement and innovation, thanks to innovative approaches to recruitment, selection, training and performance appraisal. Firms have to devote greater attention to innovative human resource practices to achieve future growth potential through human capital, such as enhancing employee skills and motivation at work, making jobs meaningful and interesting and involving employees in work teams and decision-making.

Thus, the practical implication is that human resource practices should focus on individuals and their experiences to create the right work environment to sustain competitive advantage. The ultimate aim is to develop the skills and capabilities firms need to stimulate innovation by creating an appropriate climate for facilitating human cognition, emotions and proactive behavior.

7. Conclusions

7.1 *Limitations and research perspectives*

This study has some limitations, so further research is necessary.

First, the study sample comprises employees operating in the Italian labor market. Future research should include employees from other countries to develop a comparative cross-country study and provide evidence of generalizability.

Second, although the validity of the measurement scales used in this study, some of the fit indices of the structural model were relatively poor. This may be because of the small sample size and the fact that the data collection was based on self-reported answers. Future research should enlarge the research sample and seek to learn more about the ability of the model to reproduce the data gathered.

Third, the study investigates only the direct and main effects of the three components of employee experience on employee emotional engagement and employee emotional engagement on employee innovation capabilities. Future research should analyze the mediating effect of employee emotional engagement on the relationship between employee experience and employees' innovation capabilities.

Finally, future research should consider other explanatory variables of employee experience and engagement, such as cognitive and physical engagement, employee social relationships, attachment and love, which are referred to play potential roles in developing organizational capabilities and creating and maintaining firms' competitive advantage.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Table A1 Measure items		
Construct	Items	References
Trust in supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I can depend on my supervisor to meet his/her responsibilities ■ I can rely on my supervisor to do what is best at work ■ My supervisor follows through with the commitments s(he) makes ■ Given my supervisor's track record, I see no reason to doubt his/her competence ■ I'm confident in my supervisor because (s)he approaches work with professionalism ■ I'm confident that my supervisor will always care about my personal needs at work. If I shared my problems with my supervisor, I know (s)he would respond with care ■ I'm confident that I could share my work difficulties with my supervisor ■ I'm sure I could openly communicate my feelings to my supervisor ■ I feel secure with my supervisor because of his/her sincerity 	McAllister (1995); Yang and Mossholder (2010)
Psychological meaningfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The work I do on this job is very important to me ■ My job activities are personally meaningful to me ■ The work I do on this job is worthwhile ■ My job activities are significant to me ■ The work I do on this job is meaningful to me ■ I feel that the work I do on my job is valuable 	May <i>et al.</i> (2004); Spreitzer (1995)
Sense of belonging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I feel that I belong to the firm I work for ■ I feel that my firm's leadership accepts me ■ I feel that my colleagues have faith in me 	Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011)
Emotional engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I really put my heart into my job ■ I get excited when I perform well on my job ■ I often feel emotionally attached to my job ■ My own feelings are affected by how well I perform my job 	Kahn (1990); May <i>et al.</i> (2004)
Innovation capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ I have been involved in the development of new products/services obtained in the last 3 years ■ I have been involved in the innovation of manufacturing processes developed in the last 3 years ■ I have been involved in the product/service improvements developed in the last 3 years ■ I have been involved in the innovation of marketing techniques and methods developed in the last 3 years ■ I have been involved in the improvements of the processes to allocate resources among the departments more efficiently in the last 3 years 	Camisón and Villar-López (2014); Donate <i>et al.</i> (2016)

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