

Reconceptualizing the Employee Engagement (EE): A Community Identity Approach

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1. Introduction

While business organizations struggle to maintain their talent, social communities and voluntary organizations don't, despite no tangible rewards. Talent mobility and cost of talent acquisition and retention have been central theme in human resources over the last couple of decades (Deloitte, 2023; Gartner, 2022). Research insights on communities, membership, and retention is inspired by community values and identity including national and ethnic identities (Siapakas, 2014; Syed et al., 2018). Albert and Whetten's (1985) concept of organizational identity involving centrality, distinctiveness, and enduringness has led to a debate among corporate image researchers including business and job-related characteristics with little reference to employee engagement (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Karanika-Murray et al., 2015). Since the origin of this concept, literature witnessed conceptual inconsistencies while defining EE (Krishna, 2022). The pioneering research on EE (Kahn, 1990) argue that being engaged is a personal decision, while Czarnowsky (2008) and Maslach et al. (2001) speak only of generalities, arguing EE as an organizational issue. Similarly, in several definitions, different types of engagement can be identified (cognitive, emotional and behavioral) (Harter et al., 2002). The consulting firms claiming to have devised interventions to enhance EE lack a comprehensive conceptualization and follow an activity-based approach. They only describe engagement as a "persistent positive state" (Macey and Schneider, 2008). Some research on EE examines it in terms of organizational identity: fixed vs transcending, single vs multiple (Ackerman, 2015; Geethalakshmi and Rodrigues, 2017; Saks, 2019). Although identity drives employee performance (Ismail et al., 2019), researchers have concluded that

employees typically don't believe their organization has a strong identity (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Ho and Astakhova, 2018).

Researchers have examined work/job-related, personal worth, values and sense of community, employees' social needs, and organizational support as critical drivers of engagement (Markos and Sridevi, 2010; Wood et al., 2020). Employers use EE as an instrument to guide employee actions aimed at enhanced performance, leading to profitable business (Simon, 2011; Zeidan and Itani, 2020). Moreover, some business organizations have opted for measures (such as flexi-hours, re-recruit resigners, expanded benefits packages, and referral bonuses, among others) to control the employee turnover rate (Deloitte, 2023). Though businesses want employees to value their organizations, industry and research are yet to explore a widely accepted strategy for the same (Manager and Mcbain, 2006; Sani Supriyanto et al., 2021). Thus, there is a widespread need to understand the process of organizational identity development among employees and propose a potential model to understand what contributes to identity development among employees. A critical analysis of literature on EE, identity formation, and community development, this work addresses questions such as 'Why do communities succeed in their endeavors and organizations don't?' and 'How can the insights from communities be applied in the context of business organizations?' by proposing a theoretical model on identity-driven employee engagement.

2. Community identity approach to employee engagement: proposed framework

Mead (1934) proposed symbolic interactionism theory that emphasized the meanings and implications of human interaction (verbal and non-verbal) and symbols in identity development. Mead (1934) underscored the significant role of communication (termed symbolic interaction) in the development of an individual's thoughts, self-concept, and wider community. This theory was further backed by Goffman (1959, 2002) in his work on symbolic interaction. Meyer and Rowan

(1977) proposed institutional theory that explains how institutional rules (termed myths by authors) create a strong tendency to develop organization-wide uniformity. Social identity theories emphasize individual perceptions and self-categorization: in-group and out-group (Tajfel, 1982). In their concept of ‘communities of practice’, Brown and Duguid (1991) emphasized the role of intense mutual interest and collective identities.

Though research on national, ethnic, and racial identity development dates back to the early 1900s in social sciences (Braden, 1945; Cousins, 1935; Murphy, 1953; Standing, 1934), little effort has been made to use these insights into organization identity and belongingness to examine talent mobility and retention issues. Approaches to study employer-employee relationship were transactional rather than relational. Most research on talent and retention revolved around job characteristics, technology, and performance-based rewards to drive retention (Messmer, 2006; Widayanti and Putranto, 2015). In the early 2000s, talent mobility in management emerged as a significant competitive issue and the greatest challenge in HRM in business (Cappelli, 2008; Hiltrop, 1999; McCracken, 2000; Michaels et al., 2001; Semenovich and Kuzminichna, 2016). The reward and retention models in employee mobility and retention became a challenge for businesses (Cutler, 2003; Kampkötter et al., 2016). Notably, the modern economy has been termed as talent and experience economy (Brady et al., 2008; Pine and Gilmore, 2011; Rosen, 2011). Most EE researches have examined transactional factors such as rewards, compensation and benefits, and recognition as a tool for measuring the level of engagement and retention strategies (Asif and Nisar, 2022; Scott et al., 2012). However, employee mobility rates continue to be high (Deloitte, 2023; Gartner, 2022).

The transactional approach to EE appears to have little impact on mobility and retention. Present framework attempts to examine impact of an emotional and relationship-focused approach, as in

case of community identity, as an approach to develop a sense of belongingness and retention of talented employees. The proposed research framework (see Fig. 1) relies upon insights and research on community identity development in the context of business organizations and argues that a community identity development approach would facilitate redefining the employer-employee relationship and will potentially result in more engaged employees.

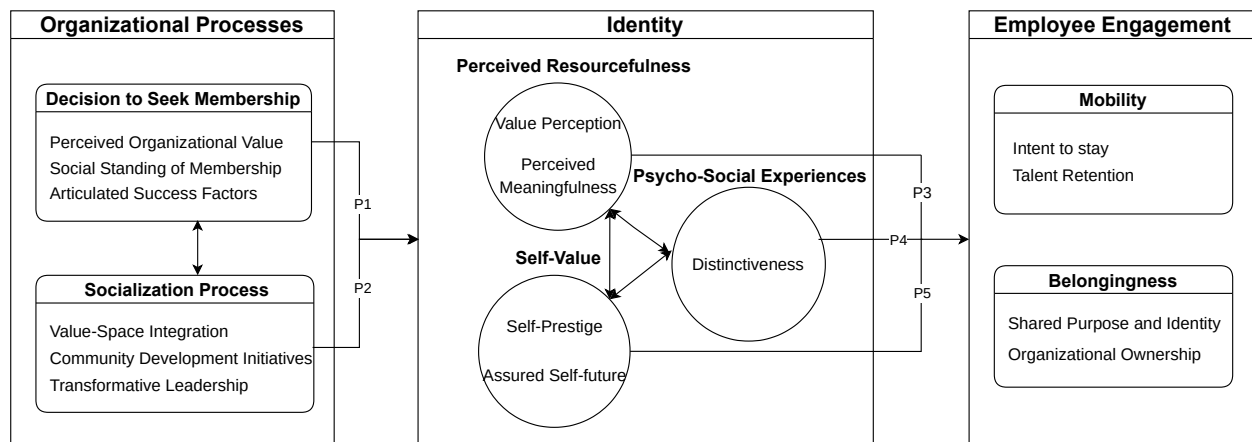


Fig. 1. Proposed framework

3. Organizational identity: insights from community identity

The concept of community identity is highly regarded; however, researchers disagree on its precise definition and measurement remain challenging to ascertain. Definitions focus on self-concept, categorization, belongingness with emotional and value significance, social comparison involving self-evaluation of abilities, and opinions and experiences (Festinger, 1954; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel et al., 1971). Recent community psychology research explored the areas of psychological sense of community, social cohesion, and community satisfaction and proposed ‘personal’ and ‘shared’ sense of community identity (Puddifoot, 1995, 2003). Similar studies have identified history, perception, duration, formalization, coexistence, similar agendas, and shared purpose as factors that contribute to developing (religious/social/organizational) identity, sense of belongingness, and

commitment (Bardon et al., 2017; Bechhofer and McCrone, 2015; Côté, 2006; Willett, 2013; Youniss et al., 1999). A stream of the recent research ‘community of practice’ argues that close-knit, small, and focused communities at the workplace are significantly more engaged and productive than conventional teams. Despite the high economic value of the employee-employer relationship, (formal/informal) community members are more engaged and committed to their goals than employees (Brown and Duguid, 1991). Thus, community development approach holds great potential to develop a highly engaged workforce. The present study attempts to reconceptualize the understanding of EE by applying the community identity development principles in the context of EE and proposes an organizational identity model of EE.

Proposed model and propositions

Identity development and learning take several forms. While Ethnic identity is learned ever since childhood under parental and family influences (Clark, 2023; Siapkas, 2014), migrant identity and learning among ethnic groups is through social and cultural shock issues (Moberg, 2023; Youniss et al., 1999). Notably, all forms of identity development involve psychological and social experiences (Peek, 2005; Phinney, 1989; Sciarra and Gushue, 2003). Organizational identity development essentially begins with a decision to seek membership of the given organization. Given the voluntary nature of membership-seeking decision, organizational image, values, and perceived professional and social status could be of powerful influence (Albert et al., 1985; Gioia et al., 2010; Karanika-Murray et al., 2015). As in migration, people always aspire to be a member of groups (nation, religion, ethnicity, among others) that are perceived as prestigious. For instance, developed countries have the highest number of immigrants (World Migration Report, 2022). In work organizations, these principles are observable in terms of employer branding and job selection behavior. Employers that brand themselves as a high-value offering, successful, and with

higher social status are more attractive to prospective and present employees. Additionally, the organizational identity formation is influenced by the cultural orientation of the individual. Hofstede's (2001) individualism - collectivism dimension offers useful insight. In collectivist cultures, individuals are more inclined to internalize organizational values and see themselves as part of a collective; whereas in individualist cultures, identity may be shaped more by personal goals and independent self-concepts (Triandis, 1995). This suggests that the initial decision to seek organizational membership is not only a rational or career-based act, but also influenced by deeper cultural and psychological structures. In business, employee mobility, new hiring and retention, and employers' need for attractiveness have become important issues.

Proposition 1: Decision to seek organizational membership positively influences acceptance and learning identity.

Identity learning and socialization, as in case of community, involves a strong and clear message, rituals, and traditions. Identity learning starts from parental influence, intercommunity interactions, and social experiences in developmental process. Organizational processes play an important role in identity development (Aboud, 1987; Peck et al., 2014). The process of socialization focuses on prompting cultural pride, developing self-esteem, historical events, and preparing new members for new experiences and challenges (Peck et al., 2014). Murray and Mulvaney (2012) highlighted the role of socialization in internalizing a positive image of the organization. The process of organizational socialization is closely related to the concept of person-organization (P-O) fit, which refers to the compatibility between an individual's values and those of the organization (Kristof, 1996). A high degree of P-O fit facilitates socialization and strengthens employees' identification with organizational values and goals (Chatman, 1989). This alignment enhances internalization of identity, while misalignment may lead to self-selection out of the

organization. Over time, such value alignment contributes to stronger organizational identity and longer-term engagement. In businesses, employees experience a socialization process through an induction program, followed by self-organization values integration and leadership. Transformative leaders attempt to change perspectives, values, habits and internalize a sense of belongingness (Sveningsson et al., 2012). Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory examined intellectual stimulation, image and reputation and inspirational appeal, seeking to change perspectives and inspiring actions. As in the case of ethnic, national, and religious identity development, such socialization factors actively interact with both conscious and subconscious levels of the employee thought process, facilitate identity transition, and develop a sense of distinctiveness (Kroger, 2003). Socialization practices and pattern determines the extent of conformity with organizational values (dealing with cognitive dissonance) and the intention to be identified with organization (value system conflict resolution) (Ashforth et al., 2016; Cornelissen et al., 2007). Hence, it appears that community-like socialization processes develop a stronger sense of organizational identity when it is compared with the reward-retention approach.

Proposition 2: Greater the efforts and initiatives of organizational socialization, stronger will be the organizational identity.

Identity: definition and development

Erickson (1968) offered an explanation of identity-based on 'self-sameness' and 'uniqueness' that allow individuals to function autonomously. Following Erickson, researchers proposed several definitions of identity with similarities and contrasts. While some researchers have defined identity in terms of answering three questions: who am I (are we)? How do I (we) relate with others? and how do I(we) differentiate from others? (Abrams et al., 1990; Hogg and Terry, 2000), others have termed identity an unbounded/unsettled space or an unresolved question (Clifford, 1988; Hall,

1989). Social scientists define identity based on two key parameters: rules of membership and content of social category (belief, desire, and physical attributes) (Cornelissen et al., 2007). In sum, researchers fail to reach a conclusive definition of the identity. Present research defines identity as *one's self-definition in terms of felt self-value (sense of prestige and safety), perceived resourcefulness (value perception and meaningfulness), and distinctiveness in psycho-social experiences.*

In the proposed idea resourcefulness refers to employees' perception of psychological value and meaningfulness in their organizational membership. This sense of value arises from how individuals experience their roles within the organization, through purpose-driven tasks, alignment with organizational goals, and perceived contributions to a larger collective (May et al., 2004; Soane et al., 2013). The term 'sustainability' in this context refers to the long-term viability of employee engagement, whereby individuals continue to invest cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy into their roles over time, reducing burnout and turnover (Christian et al., 2011). Thus, when employees perceive their organizational identity as meaningful and aligned with their values, it fosters enduring engagement that supports both individual well-being and organizational performance.

Given the failure of economic benefit-based transactional approaches to maintain organizational membership, there is a need to examine the influence of felt/perceived resourcefulness (perceived value and meaningfulness) on EE. Despite career opportunities and resources (Ho and Astakhova, 2018), both researchers and industry have expressed concerns related to employee (dis)engagement at work across the globe (Christian et al., 2011). In the Gallup (2023) survey, only 23% of the global employees reported to be engaged. Space to individual values within organizational values (as in liberal communities) could inculcate a sense of personal worth and

meaningfulness that, in turn, influence employee engagement (intent to stay). Research on autonomy, workplace identification, and sustainable professional relationships suggests balancing autonomy and accountability (Raelin, 1989). Though previous research has emphasized on the financial and process factors (Manager and Mcbain, 2006; Saks and Gruman, 2014), recent research has established that employees seek meaningfulness as an important psychological outcome in their job (May et al., 2004; Soane et al., 2013). Employees (and human beings) seek/maintain the membership of the communities that offers a higher social status and social image, economic benefits (such as employment and education), and social equality. Some observations on social conversions and changes with an active approach in underdeveloped tribal areas in India among lower caste & community demonstrate how perceived resourcefulness influence the identity relates decision making (Graceffo, 2024). Briefly, employees' perceived value and meaningfulness significantly influence EE and organizational sustainability.

Proposition 3: Perceived resourcefulness positively impacts employee engagement and organizational sustainability.

Social identity involves self-definition, community membership and values, and differentiation with other social groups/communities. As in the case of migrant workers (e.g., Mexican American, Asian Australian, etc.), their own national identity gets stronger as they learn other identity. In multiple identities, individuals explore similarities and differences, strengthen individual and collective identity (Tajfel, 1982), and focus on the sense of uniqueness and distinctiveness (Colquitt et al., 2007). In this context, distinctiveness refers primarily to the differentiation from external groups, what social identity theorists describe as the perception of the "other" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Employees derive a sense of organizational uniqueness by comparing their organization's values, culture, or mission with those of competing institutions or broader

professional groups. However, this does not preclude intra-group dynamics. Within the acquired identity, individuals may also seek a degree of uniqueness in roles, status, or contributions, consistent with theories of optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). Therefore, distinctiveness operates at two levels: externally, in contrast to other organizations or communities; and internally, through perceived uniqueness within the group. Recognizing both layers provides a more complete understanding of how identity-related differentiation fuels engagement and loyalty. Individuals seek distinction to fulfill the desire for recognition and attain a sense of individual significance within social and cultural contexts. Optimally distinctive group memberships are characterized by two fundamental human needs: inclusion and differentiation (Leonardelli and Loyd, 2016). Individuals continuously attempt to balance both needs (Simon et al., 1995) and seek distinctive but inclusive layered identities (Dicke and Ott, 2023). Research on distinctiveness and identity fusion observed that though people conform to the values associated with new/acquired identity, they desire to maintain the distinctiveness of their own/old identity (Voci, 2006). A higher level of in-group identification is accompanied by a stronger accentuation of positive distinctiveness, developing a sense of ownership, purpose, and identity (Lee et al., 2023). Some observations on religious conversion and shifts in social identity, motivated by the pursuit of self-esteem, social respect, social equality, and economic wellbeing (not necessarily financial gains, but employment opportunities and empowerment through access to education), highlight the importance of distinctiveness grounded valued factors (Graceffo, 2024). In work organizations, distinctiveness is systematically inculcated through unique values and philosophy, goals, and success factors. As an inherent part of organization, culture and stories carry uniqueness- ‘the one unlike any other’ (Clark, 1972; Martin et al., 1983). As in the case of ethnicity, nationality, and religiosity, employees

are likely to be more engaged and take ownership when they perceive their affiliation and identity as unique.

Proposition 4: An employee's perceived distinctiveness impacts employee engagement.

Self-concept, self-esteem, status, and psychological defense of values remain common themes in most social identity research and theories (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Côté, 2006). In this context, *self-value* refers to an employee's internalized sense of worth that is shaped through organizational recognition, role significance, and alignment with meaningful work. In other words, employees feel *self-valued* when the organization's practices lead them to perceive themselves as competent, respected, and meaningful contributors (Gecas, 1982; Alvesson, 2010). This is distinct from merely feeling *valued* by the organization; it emphasizes the internal realization of one's value in a social and professional context. As individuals and groups engage in intergroup comparison, status and positive self-evaluation of abilities form the basis of comparison (Alvesson, 2010; Baumeister, 1997; Festinger, 1954; Rosenberg, 1979; Tajfel, 1972). Gecas (1982) observed that high self-value can be differentiated on the parameters of competence, power, efficacy, and moral worth. Previous research suggests that when employees feel self-valued in the organization, they feel more engaged at work (Alvesson, 2010; Thatcher et al., 2002). Groups and communities promote a sense of pride, status, and value as a function of membership. Such perceptions about own group are, especially, observed in intergroup comparison. In organizations, competitive market standing and social stature of the organization influence prestige and perceived sense of future, in turn, shared organizational identity and intent to maintain membership.

Proposition 5: Employee self-value positively influences employee engagement.

4. Case in point and observations

Identity is very strong. Communities are diverse. Individual's decision related to identity – change beliefs & values versus maintain the same value system despite all other attractiveness and demonstrating continuity over long period of time – is strongly influenced by internalized value system. Recent observations, in India and across the globe, have demonstrated how a strong sense of community and internalized value system has a strong influence on individual decision making to an extent that they maintain identity despite significant professional and career gains (education and employment) in exchange of changing identity. Individuals maintain their identity and practice rituals irrespective of the value of potential gains in exchange to changing identity. The insights from community, identity, changing religion and social identity, and social conversions calls for a discourse on how learnings from communities, identity, and society can contribute to employee engagement literature. Among the global business organizations, few follow employee-related practices that focuses on employee identity and employer-employee relationship. Procter & Gamble (P&G) represents an identity-driven approach to employee engagement, emphasizing cultural integration and internal career development over transactional incentives such as short-term rewards or external recruitment. Its well-established “promote from within” policy reflects a long-term commitment to employees’ professional growth and socialization within the organization, enabling individuals to develop a strong sense of membership and internalize organizational values over time (Lee, Hameduddin, & Lee, 2023). This model instills role clarity and identity continuity, as employees build their careers through consistent cultural exposure and shared purpose (Gallup, 2023). Instead of focusing on extrinsic motivators like bonuses or perks, P&G emphasizes leadership development, mentorship, and symbolic rituals that cultivate belonging and distinctiveness, leading to sense of identity among employees (Krishna, 2022;

Dicke & Ott, 2023). These practices are coherent with the proposed idea: how identity-based mechanisms (such as perceived resourcefulness, socialization, and distinctiveness) can sustain engagement more effectively than transactional models. This paper presents a conceptual framework that illustrates how identity-based strategies can support long-term employee engagement and retention, offering an alternative to transactional approaches. By drawing on community identity theory, social science research, ethnic identity literature, it contributes to both academic literature and organizational practice by proposing the design of sustainable, value-driven engagement models suited to contemporary workplaces.

5. Potential contributions, novelty, and limitations of present research

The proposed model is a departure from transactional economic explanations for EE. It relies on insights from stable community groups to develop organizational identity and EE (membership retention and belongingness). Rewards and motivational models could disagree, but the model may trigger a re-examination of the transactional approach. The proposed model explains issues in maintaining organizational membership but does not aim to explain the entire range of employee issues. This paper contributes to the majority of the contemporary business practices by offering an alternative perspective. The proposed employee engagement approach suggests several changes in the entire employee life cycle in organizations. For instance, value-centric recruitment, membership-centric onboarding, restructuring employee experience and reward system (pay to perform, identify to grow), associate employee identity with career development process, to mention a few. These practices would potentially shift the nature of employer-employee relationship from transactional to relational, leading to enhanced employee engagement. In addition, relation/value-centric organization would be in better position to deal with talent-related issue, such as, war for talent, great attrition, among others. In the next stage of research, we aim to

empirically validate the proposed model through two stages. First, operationalization of the variables, both behavioral and beliefs, by developing measurement scale for the proposed variables in the model. Second, we aim to use quasi-experimental methodology to empirically examine the proposed model. The proposed approach to employee engagement has several implications in the organizational setting. Businesses could use this approach/model to develop a step-by-step process for organizational socialization and induction to develop beliefs, values, symbols, and behavior as espoused in the organizational identity. It could draw insights from ethnic and religious groups' approaches to develop a strong and internalized identity. The proposed model has potential to contribute in developing international strategies and step-by-step processes similar to organizational development. Though this model paves the way to an engaged workforce, it also has some challenges. When employees strongly identify with the organization, maintaining the performance level could be challenging. We aim to address such challenges as a part of future work.

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