

Examining the Intersection of Gender and Race in Employee Engagement

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This study examines differences in employee engagement based on the intersection of gender and race. Survey data from over 5,000 employees are analyzed to compare engagement levels and predictors of engagement for White males, White females, males of color, and females of color. Results indicate that males report significantly higher average engagement than females overall, and this gender gap is more pronounced for employees of color. Regression analyses find common engagement predictors across groups, such as feeling one knows what is expected on the job. However, the strength and significance of various engagement drivers differ based on gender and race. For example, having a best friend at work strongly predicts engagement for White females but not for females of color. Adjusted R-squared values from the regression models also show variation in how well the models predict engagement across gender and racial groups. These findings suggest employee engagement is influenced by one's positioning at the intersection of socially constructed categories like gender and race. Researchers and practitioners should approach engagement with an intersectional lens that considers how race and gender combine to shape individuals' experiences in the workplace.

Keywords: employee engagement, gender, race, engagement drivers

INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement has emerged as a key factor influencing organizational success. Higher levels of engagement have been shown to predict important organizational outcomes such as lower turnover, higher productivity and sales, fewer safety incidents, and other benefits (Harter et al., 2009). As such, understanding what breeds discretionary effort in the workplace remains a priority for researchers and practitioners. However, employee experiences and the dynamics shaping engagement levels likely differ depending on employees' personal attributes and their positioning within socially constructed categories.

Previous research has found that engagement levels sometimes diverge between demographic groups such as males and females (Harter et al., 2009). However, the literature provides limited consensus on whether the determinants of engagement precisely parallel or take divergent forms between these groups. Clarifying these dynamics could help inform customized yet equitable strategies for engaging diverse workforces optimally. Additionally, exploring potential contextual variations across intersectional demographic attributes such as gender and race can yield valuable insights for organizations.

The current study aims to contribute new knowledge to this area of research. Through analysis of survey data from over 5,000 employees in the United States, it investigates how key workplace factors relate to engagement separately for different gender and racial groups. Specifically, the study evaluates the relative influence of traditional engagement predictors like basic needs fulfillment alongside evolving constructs like "worker activation," which reflects discretionary commitments nurtured through empowering organizational cultures (Westover & Andrade, 2024).

This study seeks to advance managerial understanding of potential parallels and variations in what inspires discretionary effort among different gender and racial groups within the workplace. Elucidating these dynamics could provide organizations with strategic direction for taking an intersectional approach to employee engagement initiatives and cultivating an optimally engaged and productive workforce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee engagement refers to how individuals express themselves "physically, cognitively, and emotionally" in their work roles (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Employee engagement research has generally focused on psychological and behavioral determinants, including vigor, dedication, and absorption related to one's work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Recent examinations of the literature have broadened the scope to include factors that enable or limit a leader's ability to engage employees such as the external environment (e.g., political, economic, and social contexts; business competitors and customers) and internal environment (e.g., organizational culture, job roles, inter-group norms, leadership, trust). Other elements include individual traits (e.g., conscientiousness, extraversion); individual psychological conditions (e.g., meaningfulness – work makes a difference; safety – self-expression and actions preserve self-image and status; availability – physical and emotional energy); psychological state (e.g., energy toward work tasks) and behavioral engagement (e.g., voice, problem-solving; active use of cognitions and emotions) (Davis et al., 2023). Another framework categorizes engagement variables as endogenous (personal resources, positive emotions, recovery and respite activities, engagement – one's own or as influenced by others) and exogenous (job characteristics, social relations, organizational resources) (Boccoli et al., 2022), expanding on earlier studies (Rich et al., 2010; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Given the range of antecedents of employee engagement, factors impacting how it differs by gender and race must be examined.

Gender Gaps in Employee Engagement

In terms of gender, employee engagement findings are mixed. Some research has found that men experience more engagement, commitment, well-being, and inclusion than women (Nobes, 2023; Zoe Talent Solutions, 2024). However, a global study found that women are more engaged, exhibiting greater commitment, enthusiasm, and positive impact on their organizations (Frumar & Truscott-Smith, 2024). An exception is women in senior leadership who experienced lower engagement than men, possibly due to feelings of isolation and lack of emotional support, resulting in higher turnover. Perceived organizational support and employee loyalty are associated with employee engagement, particularly for women and skilled workers (Khodakarami & Dirani, 2019). Another study found no gender differences for work engagement or occupational self-efficacy, but higher career aspirations for men (Hartman & Barber, 2020). Although women believe in their abilities, they may need encouragement and mentorship to aspire to higher positions. Diversity practices that emphasize inclusion, involvement, access to communication and resources, and voice in decision making, positively impact engagement (Anchu & Thampi, 2022; Shore et al., 2018).

Cultural norms and expectations also impact women's engagement. Socially-determined roles characterize women as nurturers and men as providers (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012). This governs expectations for who participates in the workforce, who works full- or part-time, who cares for children, who should have the highest salary, and which jobs are appropriate (Cislaghi et al., 2022). Globally, women participate in the workforce at lower rates than men. Socially-assigned gender roles create external sanctions that influence women's choices and occupational preferences (Hanek & Garcia, 2022; Eagly et al., 2020). When women choose male-dominated fields, discrimination, lack of role models (Casad et al., 2018; Field et al., 2023), and low expectations for success as a result of workplace experiences (Meeussen

et al., 2022) may cause them to become less engaged and question their fit, leading to departure (Peters et al., 2012; Saucerman & Vasquez, 2014). Inequities in salary and advancement persist (Begeny et al., 2020). Rather than emphasizing attracting women to male-dominated professions, companies need to examine their cultures to determine how to retain them (Casad et al., 2018; Field et al., 2023; Ryan, 2022).

Racial Differences in Employee Engagement

High levels of employee engagement influence behaviors that improve organizational performance (Harter et al., 2002). However, employees' perceptions of their workplaces differ and impact these outcomes (Kang et al., 2023). Discrimination in the workplace is negatively associated with employee engagement for racial minorities in the U.S. (Lee & Li, 2022). Racial/ethnic minority workers in government healthcare report lower job and salary satisfaction, fewer training opportunities, less recognition, and less support from supervisors than nonminorities (Sellers et al., 2019). Black and Hispanic employees are more likely to feel discriminated against at work than White workers with White workers less likely to perceive this discrimination (Dixon et al., 2002). White workers tend to be less satisfied, have less organizational commitment, and feel less supported when in racially diverse work groups (Tsui et al., 1992), and White workers with African American supervisors have more role conflict than those with White supervisors (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989).

Racial diversity can create in-groups and out-groups and decrease productivity unless racially diverse group members have high interpersonal congruence and feel comfortable expressing their differing characteristics (Polzer et al., 2002). Workers with low levels of engagement reported a lower intent to stay when part of different-race supervisor-worker dyads while workers reporting high levels engagement had higher intent to stay in the same condition (Jones & Harter, 2005). Communicative behaviors with supervisors can mitigate low levels of engagement for racial minorities as can a diverse workplace climate (Lee & Li, 2022). Diverse work environments must be managed effectively, however. Facilitating openness, focusing on common purpose, and establishing a caring environment can improve engagement and reduce turnover in diverse work contexts (Jones & Harter, 2005).

Low perceived organizational performance, or employees' interpretation of signals that indicate their organizations are low-achieving, results in decreased personal performance and motivation, and increases the likelihood of leaving (Allen et al., 2003; Zeffane & Melhem, 2017). For White employees in federal public health agencies, high job satisfaction was associated with high perceived organizational performance to a greater degree than for employees of color (Kang et al., 2023). This may be explained by White employees emphasizing recognition and intrinsic rewards while employees of color emphasize extrinsic rewards and diversity programming (Lee et al., 2020). Priority for career growth may explain why White employees emphasize high perceived organizational performance (Kang et al., 2023). Perceived procedural justice was lower for employees of color who did not view promotions as merit-based, felt poor performance was not addressed, and reported lack of involvement in decision making. Perceived organizational performance and other factors identified contribute to a lack of engagement, particularly for racial/ethnic minorities.

Summary

The literature review illustrates that drivers of employee engagement differ by gender and race, generally finding that both women and racial minorities have fewer positive experiences in the workplace than White men. In some cases, this leads to lower levels of engagement while in others, workers are engaged in spite of these experiences. Studies examining employee engagement for racial/minority workers compared to White workers indicates lower levels of engagement for the former. Both women and racial minorities face on-going challenges in the workplace such as discrimination, lower pay, lack of advancement, conflict, limited support, and lack of belonging. These can be mitigated by changes in organizational structure and culture (Casad et al., 2018; Field et al., 2023; Ryan, 2022; Saks, 2022).

Based on research identifying employee engagement antecedents such as autonomy, feedback, development, workplace climate, rewards and recognition, support, job variety, and work role fit (Crawford et al., 2010; Wolland & Shuck, 2011), Saks (2022) developed a caring management practice framework.

The framework comprises job design, training, development, flexible work, work-life balance, participative decision making, health and safety, career development, and health and wellness. Further research is needed to examine this and similar frameworks to determine their efficacy on employee engagement for different worker groups.

HYPOTHESES

The literature on racial and gender differences in employee engagement indicates mixed findings. Research on how basic needs, individual determinants, teamwork factors, and growth aspects impact engagement for men and women across racial demographic categories is limited. Based on the literature and limitations in previous research, this study aims to explore potential differences in the predictors of employee engagement across gender and racial groups. Specifically, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *Male and female workers of all races will report similar levels of employee engagement.*

Hypothesis 2a: *Basic needs and individual contributions variables will similarly predict employee engagement for male and female workers of all races.*

Hypothesis 2b: *Basic needs determinants will be more salient in predicting employee engagement for female workers of all races.*

Hypothesis 2c: *Individual determinants will be more salient in predicting employee engagement for male workers of all races.*

Hypothesis 3: *Teamwork determinants will be more salient in predicting employee engagement for female workers than male workers of all races.*

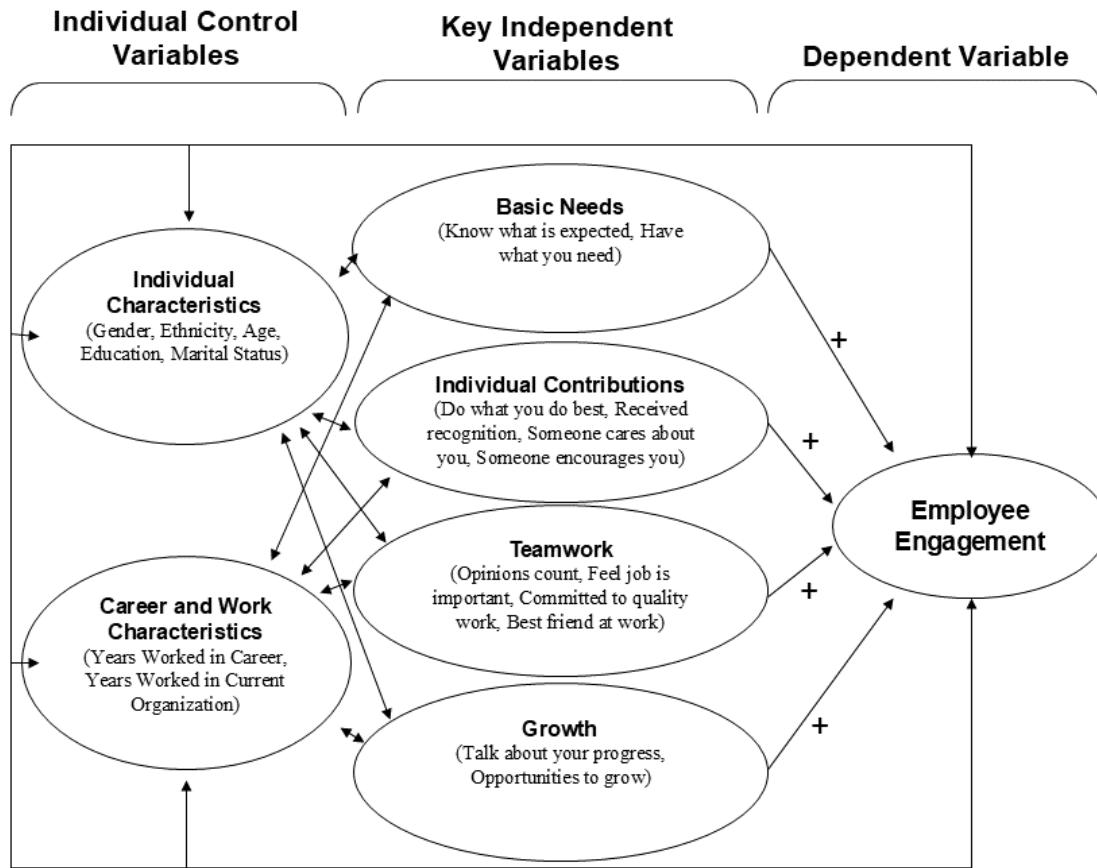
Hypothesis 4: *Growth determinants will be more salient in predicting employee engagement for male workers than female workers of all races.*

Hypothesis 5: *Worker activation determinants will be more salient in predicting employee engagement for female workers than male workers of all races.*

RESEARCH MODEL AND DESIGN

This study utilized an online questionnaire to examine how key factors related to employee engagement may be evolving differently across gender and racial groups. Drawing from established scales such as Gallup's Q12 employee engagement survey (Harter et al., 2009) as well as more recent work focusing on employee activation (Westover & Andrade, 2024), the questionnaire was designed to measure several important constructs. These included employee basic needs, individual contributions, teamwork dynamics, growth opportunities, and employee activation variables. A stratified random sampling approach was used to distribute the survey across various gender and racial demographics in the United States during Spring 2024. Responses from over 550 employees were obtained and deemed suitable for analysis.

FIGURE 1
RESEARCH MODEL



Operationalization of Variables

We operationalized the study variables according to the approach of Harter et al. (2009) and added new survey questions, which allowed us to introduce additional variables in the analysis. See Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
STUDY VARIABLES AND MEASUREMENTS

Variable	Item
<i>Dependent Variable</i>	
Employee engagement	“Overall, how engaged are you in your (main) job?” (1) not at all engaged to (10) extremely engaged
<i>Worker Engagement</i>	
Know what is expected	“Do you know what is expected of you at work?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Have what you need	“Do you have the materials and equipment to do your work right?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Do what you do best	“I Have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Received recognition	“In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree

Someone cares about you	“Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Someone encourages you	“Is there someone at work who encourages your development?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Opinions count	“At work, do your opinions seem to count?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Feel job is important	“Does the mission/purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Committed to quality work	“Are your associates (fellow employees) committed to doing quality work?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Best friend at work	“Do you have a best friend at work?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Talk about your progress	“In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Opportunities to grow	“In the last year, have you had opportunities to learn and grow?” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
<i>Understanding of Meaning and Purpose</i>	
Meaningful work	“I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
Purposeful work	“I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
<i>Sense of Belonging</i>	“I believe that my work group is where I am meant to be.” (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree
<i>Leadership Efficacy</i>	“I see myself as a leader.” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
<i>Organizational Commitment</i>	“I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.” (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree
<i>Controls</i>	Dummy variables for race, ethnicity, education level, marital status, and state of residence; Continuous variables for birth year, full-time years worked in career, and years worked in current organization.

Statistical Methodology

A multi-stage analytical approach examined relationships between employees' work experiences, demographic characteristics, and self-reported engagement levels. Initial descriptive analyses provided an overview of engagement and activation variable means by race and gender, as well as for the overall sample. Differences in average engagement between racial and gender groups were then assessed using t-test analyses to evaluate Hypothesis 1. Next, ordinary least squares and ordered probit regression models were estimated separately by race and gender to examine the predictive ability of basic needs, individual contributions, teamwork dynamics, and growth factors on engagement for each group per Hypotheses 2-3. Finally, moderation analyses tested for significant differences between racial/gender subgroups in how activation determinants related to engagement according to Hypotheses 4-5. This allowed for the comparison of key drivers of engagement across intersectional identities.

RESULTS

Participant Demographics

566 employees participated in the stratified random sample, representing different demographic groups across the United States. All participants were employed either full-time or part-time both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic period when the study was conducted. As shown in Table 2, males comprised 46.11% (n=261) of the sample, while females accounted for 53.89% (n=305).

Additional demographic information was collected. As seen in Tables 3 and 4, racially 67.67% of respondents identified as White, 19.96% as Black, 9.72% as Asian, just over 1% as Native American or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and less than 2% reported another race. When asked about ethnicity, 88.34% were not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, whereas 11.66% identified as such.

As displayed in Table 5, over 44% (n=249) of respondents had attained some college education or less, while under 56% (n=314) held a college degree or higher. Table 6 shows that 62.7% of the sample reported being married or cohabitating, while 36.59% identified as single. As shown in Table 7, on average respondents were born in 1977. Respondents had worked full-time for 20.57 years throughout their career and had spent an average of 13.94 years working for their current organization.

TABLE 2
GENDER OF RESPONDENT

	Freq.	Percent
Female	305	53.89
Male	261	46.11
Total	566	100

TABLE 3
RACE OF RESPONDENT

	Freq.	Percent
White	383	67.67
Black or African-American	113	19.96
Asian	55	9.72
Native American or Alaska Native	2	0.35
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	4	0.71
Other	9	1.59
Total	566	100

TABLE 4
ETHNICITY OF RESPONDENT

	Freq.	Percent
Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin	66	11.66
Not Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin	500	88.34
Total	566	100

TABLE 5
EDUCATION LEVEL OF RESPONDENT

	Freq.	Percent
Less than high school	6	1.07
High school diploma	96	17.05
Some college, but no degree	147	26.11
Bachelor's degree	192	34.1
Master's degree	97	17.23
Doctoral degree	25	4.44
Total	563	100

TABLE 6
MARITAL STATUS OF RESPONDENT

	Freq.	Percent
Married or cohabitating	353	62.7
Single	206	36.59
Prefer not to say	4	0.71
Total	563	100

TABLE 7
OTHER DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENT

	Mean	Std. Dev.
Birth year	1977.34	13.99
Full-time years worked in career	20.57	13.92
Years worked in current organization	13.94	86.29

Descriptive Results

Table 8 displays the mean scores for employee engagement, employee activation variables, and other key study measures by race and gender, along with significant differences where present. A statistically significant racial and gender difference was found for employee engagement, with males reporting higher average engagement levels than females. While this is the case for both White and non-White males, the divide between men and women is much more dramatic for persons of color. Therefore, hypothesis 1, which predicted no difference in engagement by race or gender is partially supported. Additionally, several other variables exhibited significant gender differences. Specifically, males had significantly higher mean scores compared to females on numerous study variables. Additionally, as with employee engagement, the gender divide in mean scores of other study variables is often more pronounced for persons of color. Females did not have statistically significant higher average scores on employee engagement or activation variables. Previous research has been inconsistent in determining gender differences although men have been found to have higher levels consistent with the findings in the current study (Frumar & Truscott-Smith, 2024; Nobes, 2023; Sharma et al., 2017; Zoe Talent Solutions, 2024).

TABLE 8
VARIABLE MEANS AND TEST OF DIFFERENCES, BY RACE AND GENDER

Dependent Variable	Caucasian				Person of Color			
	Females		Male		Females		Male	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Employee Engagement	7.77	2.19	8.17	1.74	7.54	2.24	8.22	1.76
Employee Engagement Questions								
Do you know what is expected of you at work?	4.61	0.75	4.61	0.61	4.71	0.52	4.57	0.75
Do you have the materials and equipment to do your work right?	4.38	0.90	4.31	0.84	4.47	0.69	4.30	0.85
At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?	4.16	0.96	4.30	0.85	4.18	0.88	4.24	0.96
In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?	3.52	1.40	3.74	1.34	3.36	1.48	3.78	1.25
Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?	4.06	1.08	4.28	0.92	4.01	1.10	4.10	0.98
Is there someone at work who encourages your development?	3.78	1.24	3.89	1.17	3.98	1.07	4.02	1.10
At work, do your opinions seem to count?	3.72	1.27	4.06	1.10	4.00	1.02	4.16	1.01
Does the mission/purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?	3.84	1.19	4.12	1.00	4.02	0.98	4.08	0.91
Are your associates (fellow employees) committed to doing quality work?	3.89	1.06	4.24	0.87	3.93	0.99	4.14	0.91
Do you have a best friend at work?	3.35	1.51	3.50	1.31	3.18	1.64	3.48	1.44
In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?	3.54	1.38	3.71	1.29	3.48	1.42	3.74	1.25
In the last year, have you had opportunities to learn and grow?	3.79	1.31	4.02	1.08	3.74	1.19	4.02	1.05
Employee Activation Questions								
I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.	4.02	1.11	4.06	1.05	4.01	0.97	4.07	0.93
I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.	3.89	1.21	4.04	1.02	3.81	1.19	4.03	0.95
I believe that my work group is where I am meant to be.	4.88	1.86	5.34	1.57	5.00	1.67	5.29	1.50
I see myself as a leader.	3.71	1.64	4.02	1.47	4.18	1.55	4.20	1.40
I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.	4.99	1.89	5.41	1.79	4.80	1.88	5.10	1.61

Dependent Variable	All						All		
	Females		Male		T Statistic & p-value for sig. diff				
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	p-value			
Employee Engagement	7.70	2.21	8.19	1.74	-2.861**	0.002	563		
Employee Engagement Questions									
Do you know what is expected of you at work?	4.64	0.69	4.60	0.66	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.		
Do you have the materials and equipment to do your work right?	4.40	0.84	4.30	0.84	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.		
At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?	4.16	0.94	4.28	0.89	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.		
In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?	3.47	1.42	3.75	1.31	-2.399**	0.008	563		
Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?	4.04	1.09	4.22	0.94	-2.035*	0.021	563		
Is there someone at work who encourages your development?	3.84	1.19	3.94	1.14	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.		
At work, do your opinions seem to count?	3.80	1.21	4.10	1.07	-3.033***	0.001	563		
Does the mission/purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?	3.89	1.13	4.11	0.97	-2.374**	0.009	563		
Are your associates (fellow employees) committed to doing quality work?	3.90	1.04	4.20	0.88	-3.695***	0.000	563		
Do you have a best friend at work?	3.30	1.55	3.49	1.35	-1.581*	0.05	563		
In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?	3.53	1.39	3.72	1.27	-1.685*	0.046	563		
In the last year, have you had opportunities to learn and grow?	3.77	1.27	4.02	1.07	-2.462**	0.007	563		
Employee Activation Questions									
I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.	4.02	1.07	4.06	1.01	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.		
I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.	3.87	1.20	4.04	0.99	-1.850*	0.032	563		
I believe that my work group is where I am meant to be.	4.91	1.80	5.32	1.54	-2.860**	0.002	562		
I see myself as a leader.	3.85	1.62	4.08	1.44	-1.781*	0.038	563		
I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.	4.93	1.88	5.30	1.73	-2.404**	0.008	562		

Regression Results

Following the approach of Harter et al. (2009), we examined the association between employee engagement and the independent variables across multiple regression analyses. The first model (Table 9) examined the influence of employee basic needs, individual contributions, teamwork, growth, and control variables on employee engagement, by race and gender. In the second model (Table 10), we examined those same areas' joint influence of all control and independent variables on employee engagement, but we added a series of "employee activation" variables by race and gender, and for the total sample. Once these "worker activation" variables were added to the second model, many of the variables in the first model fell out of significance. Therefore, the last model (Table 11) focuses on the most impactful engagement and activation variables and represents what we consider to be "the best" model.

Table 9 shows variation in standardized beta coefficient statistical significance for each variable across each model. For White women, "do what you do best," "someone cares about you", "feel job is important," "best friend at work," and "opportunities to grow" are each statistically significant variables in predicting employee engagement. For White men, "what is needed," "feel job is important," "committed to quality work," and "best friend at work" are each statistically significant variables in predicting worker employee engagement. For women of color, only "do what you do best" is statistically significant in predicting employee engagement. For men of color, "know what is expected", "what is needed," and "opportunity to grow" are each statistically significant variables in predicting worker employee engagement.

Additionally, there were variations in *adjusted r-squared* values for the female (adjusted r-squared = 0.458) and male (adjusted r-squared = 0.499) OLS regression models overall, meaning the model accounted for just under 46% of the variation in employee engagement for women and just under 50% of the variation in employee engagement for men. The *adjusted r-squared* value was identical for White women and men (adjusted r-squared = 0.530) and males (adjusted r-squared = 0.477), meaning the model is equally predictive for White women and men. *Adjusted r-squared* values for women of color (adjusted r-squared = 0.254) and men of color (adjusted r-squared = 0.592), meaning the model is more than two times more predictive for men of color than women of color.

In Table 10, there is variation in standardized beta coefficient statistical significance for each variable across each model. For White women, "know what is expected," "someone cares about you", "best friend at work," "opportunities to grow," and "organizational commitment" are statistically significant variables in predicting employee engagement. For White men, "know what is expected," "someone knows your development," "someone talked to you about your progress," "work with purpose," and "organizational commitment" are statistically significant in predicting worker employee engagement. For women of color, "someone cares about you," "work with purpose," and "where I am meant to be" are each statistically significant variables in predicting employee engagement. For men outside of Utah, only "know what is expected," "where meant to be," and "organizational commitment" are each statistically significant variables in predicting worker employee engagement.

Additionally, there were variations in *adjusted r-squared* values for the female (adjusted r-squared = 0.554) and male (adjusted r-squared = 0.558) OLS regression models overall, meaning the model accounted for just over 55% of the variation in employee engagement for women and just under 56% of the variation in employee engagement for men. The *adjusted r-squared* value for Caucasian females (adjusted r-squared = 0.566) is lower than for Caucasian males (adjusted r-squared = 0.601), meaning the model is slightly more predictive for White men than White women. The *adjusted r-squared* value for women of color (adjusted r-squared = 0.500) is significantly lower than that of the value for men of color (adjusted r-squared = 0.630), meaning the model predicts 63% of the variation of employee engagement for men of color and just 50% of the variation in employee engagement for women of color.

Finally, we took the most impactful engagement and activation variables from the last model, combined with our control variables, to create our best fit model. As seen in Table 11, there is variation in standardized beta coefficient statistical significance for each variable across each model. For White women, "best friend at work" is the only engagement variable that is not statistically significant, while "where I am meant to be" and "I see myself as a leader" are both activation variables that are not statistically significant. For White men, "know what is expected" and "best friend at work" were statistically significant engagement variables,

while “where I am meant to be” and I see myself as a leader” are both activation variables that are not statistically significant. For women of color, none of the engagement variables are statistically significant and only “work with purpose” and “where I am meant to be” are statistically significant activation variables. For men of color, only “know what is expected” and “where meant to be” were statistically significant in the model.

Additionally, there were variations in *adjusted r-squared* values for the female (adjusted r-squared = 0.554) and male (adjusted r-squared = 0.582) OLS regression models overall, meaning the model accounted for just over 55% of the variation in employee engagement for women and just over 58% of the variation in employee engagement for men. The *adjusted r-squared* values for White females (adjusted r-squared = 0.558) and White males (adjusted r-squared = 0.566) are very similar, meaning the model is nearly equally predictive for both White women and men. For people of color, *adjusted r-squared* values for females (adjusted r-squared = 0.525) are significantly lower than that of males (adjusted r-squared = 0.606), meaning the model is much more predictive for men of color than women of color; the model predicts about 61% of the variation of employee engagement for men of color and about 53% of the variation in employee engagement for women of color.

TABLE 9
MODEL 1 - ORIGINAL EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STANDARDIZED OLS REGRESSION
RESULTS, BY GENDER AND LOCATION

	Caucasian		Person of Color		All	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Employee Engagement Questions						
Do you know what is expected of you at work?	0.081	0.108	-0.015	0.462***	0.059	0.238***
Do you have the materials and equipment to do your work right?	0.032	0.218**	0.005	-0.233*	0.026	0.075
At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?	0.123*	-0.131	0.310*	0.158	0.163**	-0.026
In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?	0.023	0.060	-0.062	-0.049	-0.037	0.031
Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?	0.212**	0.092	0.231	-0.047	0.232***	0.041
Is there someone at work who encourages your development?	0.082	-0.154	-0.177	0.211*	0.021	-0.055
At work, do your opinions seem to count?	-0.054	0.065	0.064	0.123	-0.014	0.093
Does the mission/purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?	0.224***	0.214**	0.247	0.127	0.2568***	0.241***
Are your associates (fellow employees) committed to doing quality work?	-0.034	0.159*	0.005	0.049	-0.013	0.076
Do you have a best friend at work?	0.136**	0.167*	-0.024	0.121	0.077	0.159**
In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?	-0.109	0.097	-0.010	-0.168	-0.043	0.011
In the last year, have you had opportunities to learn and grow?	0.243**	0.076	0.020	0.284*	0.136*	0.129*
Controls						
Ethnicity	0.051	-0.055	0.099	0.060	0.056	-0.007
State of Residence	-0.006	0.013	-0.096	0.147	-0.025	0.046
Birth Year	-0.238***	-0.215*	-0.332*	0.093	-0.261***	-0.107
Education Level	-0.075	-0.061	-0.065	0.039	-0.063	-0.029
Marital Status	0.044	-0.111*	0.142	0.024	0.060	-0.068
Years Worked in Career	-0.165*	0.006	-0.294	-0.106	-0.176*	-0.019
Years Worked in Current Organization	0.054	0.095	0.107	0.171*	0.057	0.085*
N	210	170	90	91	300	261
Adjusted R-Squared	0.530	0.530	0.254	0.592	0.458	0.4999
F	13.39***	11.01***	2.59**	7.88***	13.64***	13.99***

Note: Beta values; Significance levels: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

TABLE 10
MODEL 2 - REVISED EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STANDARDIZED OLS REGRESSION
RESULTS, BY GENDER AND LOCATION

	Caucasian		Person of Color		All	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Employee Engagement Questions						
Do you know what is expected of you at work?	0.104*	0.156*	-0.021	0.322**	0.064	-0.017
Do you have the materials and equipment to do your work right?	0.051	0.107	0.128	-0.164	0.104*	-0.022
At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?	0.075	-0.083	0.057	0.081	-0.037	-0.037
In the last seven days, have you received recognition or praise for doing good work?	0.009	0.020	-0.011	-0.102	0.173**	-0.029
Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?	0.175*	-0.006	0.201*	-0.118	0.007	-0.088
Is there someone at work who encourages your development?	0.072	-0.172*	-0.189	0.176	-0.043	0.055
At work, do your opinions seem to count?	-0.037	-0.003	-0.049	0.170	0.082	0.1101*
Does the mission/purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?	0.073	0.090	0.127	0.082	-0.024	-0.024
Are your associates (fellow employees) committed to doing quality work?	-0.017	0.028	-0.129	-0.058	0.020	0.090*
Do you have a best friend at work?	0.096*	0.094	-0.135	0.110	-0.042	0.098
In the last six months, has someone at work talked to you about your progress?	-0.096	0.249**	0.073	-0.160	0.056	0.098
In the last year, have you had opportunities to learn and grow?	0.164*	0.011	0.047	0.200		
Employee Activation Questions						
I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.	0.123	0.125	0.050	-0.001	0.045	0.075
I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.	0.069	0.240**	0.238*	0.020	0.167**	0.192**
I believe that my work group is where I am meant to be.	0.013	0.018	0.415**	0.333**	0.155*	0.192**
I see myself as a leader.	0.057	0.066	0.051	0.066	0.146*	0.055
I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.	0.144*	0.185*	0.124	0.165*		0.140*
Controls						
Ethnicity	0.044	-0.078	0.021	0.048	0.047	-0.043
State of Residence	-0.017	-0.005	0.033	0.033	-0.030	0.008
Birth Year	-0.217*	-0.052	0.046	0.031	-0.233***	-0.100
Education Level	-0.060	-0.063	-0.140	0.016	-0.059	-0.028
Marital Status	0.056	-0.056	0.241**	0.053	0.093*	-0.007
Years Worked in Career	-0.191*	-0.016	-0.011	-0.027	-0.175**	-0.018
N	210	170	90	91	300	261
Adjusted R-Squared	0.556	0.601	0.500	0.630	0.537	0.583
F	11.92***	11.60***	4.71***	7.40***	15.47***	16.14***

Note: Beta values; Significance levels: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

TABLE 11
MODEL 3 - BEST EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STANDARDIZED OLS REGRESSION
RESULTS, BY GENDER AND LOCATION

	Caucasian		Person of Color		All	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Employee Engagement Questions						
Do you know what is expected of you at work?	0.112*	0.155*	-0.025	0.283**	0.077	0.209***
At work, do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?	0.124*	0.011	0.135	0.026	0.128*	0.002
Does your supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about you as a person?	0.209*	0.014	0.107	-0.015	0.160**	-0.012
Does the mission/purpose of your company make you feel your job is important?	0.128*	0.124	0.067	0.131	0.089	0.143*
Do you have a best friend at work?	0.085	0.113*	-0.128	0.108	0.015	0.113**
Employee Activation Questions						
I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.	0.166*	0.281***	0.295**	0.089	0.207***	0.231***
I believe that my work group is where I am meant to be.	0.041	0.105	0.322**	0.33**	0.134*	0.201**
I see myself as a leader.	0.063	0.050	0.080	0.046	0.075*	0.061
I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.	0.157*	0.145*	0.120	0.138	0.147**	0.126*
Controls						
Ethnicity	0.051	-0.082	0.048	-0.008	0.047	-0.047
State of Residence	-0.026	0.010	-0.025	-0.002	-0.036	0.017
Birth Year	-0.250***	-0.175*	-0.072	0.004	-0.236***	-0.092
Education Level	-0.052	-0.036	-0.089	-0.005	-0.057	-0.022
Marital Status	0.050	-0.069	0.237**	0.062	0.085*	-0.022
Years Worked in Career	-0.192**	-0.044	0.009	-0.071	-0.164**	-0.035
N	210	170	90	91	300	261
Adjusted R-Squared	0.558	0.566	0.525	0.606	0.544	0.582
F	18.56	15.71***	7.55***	10.23***	23.28***	23.63***

Note: Beta values; Significance levels: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Revisiting Hypotheses

The study findings allow for a reexamination of the original hypotheses.

- Hypothesis 1 proposed similar engagement levels across gender and racial groups. However, results indicated males reported significantly higher engagement than females overall, and this gender gap was more pronounced for employees of color. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.
- Hypothesis 2a predicted basic needs and contributions would similarly predict engagement

across groups. This received partial support as regression models found some common predictors but also variation in significant predictors between racial/gender subgroups.

- Hypotheses 2b-2c and 3-4 suggested certain factors would be most salient for specific gender/racial identities. Results did not consistently validate these, with significant predictors differing across models.
- Hypothesis 5 proposed activation factors would impact females more. Variation was found in how activation variables predicted engagement in full models across racial/gender groups.

Overall, most hypotheses received only partial or no validation. Hypothesis 1 was not supported, while Hypothesis 2a received partial confirmation. However, hypothesized differences in importance of specific predictors for engagement based on intersecting identities (Hypotheses 2b-5) were not consistently validated given variability observed between regression models. In summary, empirical findings provided limited evidence to fully support the original hypotheses as posed.

A Revised Employee Engagement Model

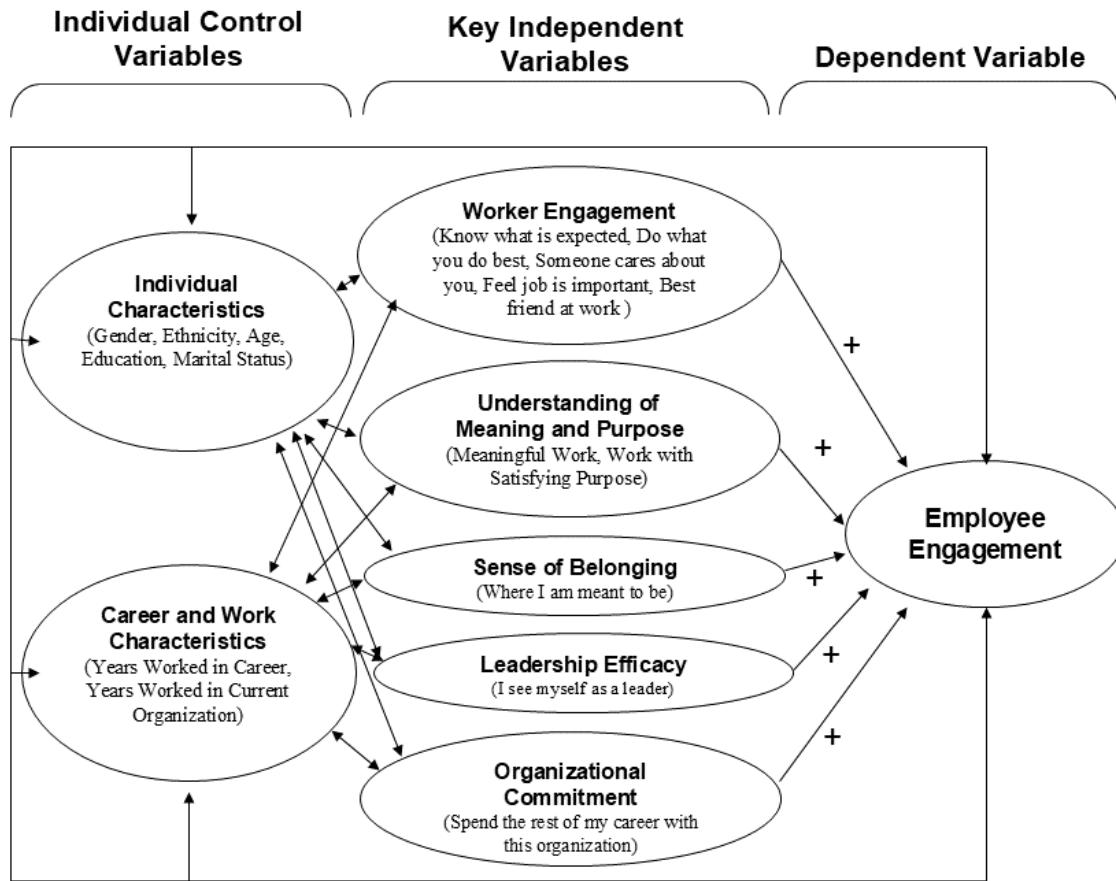
The initial conceptual framework and hypotheses only partially captured the complex relationships found between employee engagement, demographics, and workplace factors. While determinants like fulfilling basic needs, enabling contributions/teamwork, and providing growth maintained relevance, the study validated updating the framework to better incorporate the prominent influence of worker activation constructs.

The revised conceptual framework in Figure 2 positions the multidimensional activation dimensions of purposeful work, sense of belonging, leadership efficacy, and organizational commitment as core influencers of employee engagement rather than separate predictors. This provides a more robust perspective for comprehending engagement in dynamic work settings by conceptualizing activation as central rather than separate or ancillary.

By placing activation at the core, the updated model acknowledges research showing engagement depends more on discretionary commitment cultivated through inclusive, empowering cultures rather than solely basic expectations. It also recognizes cross-demographic importance of activation in motivating discretionary effort to maximize well-being and business outcomes. The model understands cultivating activation can inspire extra effort across all groups to achieve optimal individual and organizational results.

The revised framework offers insights to guide ongoing study. Rather than a fixed state, engagement may vary by context and be shaped by attributes and strategically designed workplace experiences adapting to evolving norms. This presents new avenues for maximizing diverse, thriving workforces through customized approaches tailored to foster high employee activation.

FIGURE 2
REVISED RESEARCH MODEL



DISCUSSION

The current study provides new insights into how employee engagement levels and predictors may differ based on positioning at the intersection of gender and race. Overall, findings support an intersectional approach to better understanding and fostering engagement among diverse workforces.

The identification of significant gender and racial gaps in average engagement levels, with particularly pronounced divides for employees of color, highlights the need for intersectional consideration. Organizations should examine whether initiatives benefit all demographic groups equally or inadvertently advantage some over others. Tailored engagement strategies may be warranted.

Results also indicated variability in specific factors predicting engagement across gender and racial identities. While some determinants universally surfaced like feeling informed of role expectations, others showed subgroup variation. This implies engagement initiatives need customized targets for each identity cohort. A one-size-fits-all approach risks misalignment with relevant drivers.

Positioning worker activation as core to engagement further advances theory. This underscores that engagement depends more on discretionary commitment nurtured through empowering cultures versus solely meeting basic needs. Organizations must strategically cultivate a sense of purpose, belonging, leadership efficacy and commitment across intersectional identities to maximize engagement for all.

Certain limitations warrant discussion. The cross-sectional design precludes causal claims. Longitudinal research examining subgroup changes over time and contexts could provide deeper insights.

Additionally, sample demographics may limit generalizability beyond represented identities and industries. More intersectional attributes merit investigation too.

Findings call for practitioners to apply an intersectional lens considering how worker experiences are shaped by gender and race combinations. Customized and equitable approaches calibrated to targeted engagement determinants for each identity cohort seem needed to optimally engage all employees. Continued research unpacking intersectional employee experiences can further empower organizations seeking to foster thriving workforces.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS AND WORKERS

Organizations should carefully evaluate existing engagement initiatives to ensure equitable benefits are being derived across different gender and racial identities. A thorough examination of engagement data disaggregated by these demographic factors can reveal where improvements may be needed. Customizing engagement targets, strategies, and tactics based on the unique drivers of engagement identified for each subgroup is important to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach that risks inadvertently disadvantaging or failing to optimally engage some identities. Simply focusing on universal engagement outcomes without considering identity-specific needs could undermine efforts to cultivate an optimally engaged workforce representative of the diversity within it.

Concerted, sustained, and multifaceted efforts are needed from organizational leaders and human resource professionals to strategically foster a strong foundation of worker activation among all employees. This involves cultivating a deep sense of purpose, meaning, belonging, leadership efficacy, and organizational commitment through policies, practices, resources, culture and day-to-day interactions tailored to celebrate and address the varied experiences employees bring based on their identities and social positioning. Leaders must commit to developing customized approaches that underscore engagement depends more on nurturing discretionary commitment through empowering and inclusive environments rather than focusing solely on meeting basic needs, job requirements or performance metrics.

The most promising path forward encompasses holistic engagement strategies that embrace multidimensional activation at their core while still addressing traditional determinants. A balanced and integrated approach is needed, one in which activation-focused tactics aimed at inspiring discretionary effort are prioritized but complemented by continued efforts ensuring foundational needs, contributions, teamwork, growth and resources are optimally fulfilled based on identity contexts. Both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic resources require consideration. Organizations that view engagement through an intersectional activation lens and commit dedicating sufficient resources to customized activation-oriented programs, initiatives, policies and cultures are poised to realize engaging workforces in a truly equitable and sustainable manner.

Individual workers must also play a proactive role in exploring how to cultivate their own activation within the social identities characterizing their experiences and positionality. Seeking out supportive managers, teams, mentors and professional environments where identities combine optimally to nurture discretionary commitment, leadership, skills growth and holistic wellbeing empowers ownership over one's engagement journey. Ongoing skills development, relationship-building, mentoring relationships and equitable access to stretch assignments or sponsorship presenting meaningful leadership opportunities across levels and functions can help foster efficacy and development across all employee identities.

With equitable, intersectional and activation-oriented concepts emerging as promising longer-term strategies, organizations and workforces engaged in collaboratively cultivating these approaches are well-positioned to reap enduring benefits in optimizing employee engagement, performance and wellbeing. An evolving model that embraces dynamic social identities and commits to continuously addressing them portends the type of inclusive, flexible and empowering workforce cultures necessary for ongoing success in our rapidly changing world.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This initial study serves as a starting point for continuing employee engagement exploration through an intersectional lens. Several opportunities exist to build on these findings:

- Longitudinal research could help clarify causality by examining whether engagement and predictors shift over time differently across subgroups as workplace contexts evolve. A panel design tracking the same participants would address limitations of cross-sectional data.
- Expanding sample diversity in demographic attributes like age, family status, job level, industries and organization types would enhance generalizability and uncover additional intersectional dynamics not represented here. Underrepresented groups warrant tailored examination.
- Experimental research manipulating activation-oriented tactics could provide causal evidence for their impact on engagement outcomes across identities. Comparing customized initiatives to standardized approaches could validate intersectional strategies.
- Qualitative inquiry complementing quantitative data helps explain engagement experiences through individual voices and contexts. Interviews exploring identity-specific needs, barriers and engagement journeys would offer deeper cultural insights.
- Cross-country comparisons investigating population differences could uncover universal engagement relationships as well as influences of national cultural dimensions on subgroup experiences.
- Engagement consequences like retention, well-being, performance and business impacts merit continued examination of whether effects remain consistent or vary situationally across intersectional cohorts.
- Additional psychological measures assessing factors like belonging, empowerment and leader behaviors would offer a more holistic picture of how activation links to engagement across diverse workspheres.

With engagement recognition growing, ongoing commitment to advancing knowledge through an intersectional lens empowers evidence-based strategies optimizing this crucial workplace construct for all. Addressing diversity's often muted voice advances equity in engagement theory, policy and practice.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes new knowledge towards advancing employee engagement theory and practice through an intersectional lens. Findings indicate engagement levels and predictors are influenced by one's positioning across gender and racial identities in complex ways. Significant gaps in engagement between males and females were evident, especially for employees of color, highlighting the need to consider within-group diversity.

While some engagement drivers proved universal, subgroup variation in relevant determinants was also observed. This implies customized, identity-oriented strategies are warranted rather than one-size-fits-all approaches. Positioning worker activation core to engagement theory underscores the importance of cultivating discretionary commitment through empowering organizational cultures.

Limitations prompt additional research employing longitudinal, experimental and qualitative designs to clarify causality while enhancing sample diversity and generalizability. Continued examination of activation tactics, identity-based experiences, and engagement outcomes can optimize theoretical and practical understanding.

Results point to practitioners applying an intersectional lens when considering how identities shape engagement and evaluating initiative impacts. Customized approaches addressing identity-matched determinants seem vital to equitably optimize engagement for all.

With diversity growing yet often marginalized voices, an ongoing commitment to intersectional scholarship empowers evidence-based strategies for engagement optimization inclusive of diversity's full

potential. Advancing equitable theory, policy, and culture portends successful twenty-first-century workforce models nurturing varied identities as sources of strength.

In conclusion, this initial exploration adds intersectionality to employee engagement discourse with implications for researchers continuing this vital work and organizations seeking thriving workforces representative of societies' richness. An evolving paradigm embracing dynamic identities holds promise for employee well-being and performance outcomes, benefiting people and businesses alike.

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