
Role of social connectivity and job engagement in positive change: evidence from the Middle East

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Abstract: Taking a positive perspective, the study aims to investigate change at a Middle Eastern financial services firm. Using various workplace fun activities (business, sports, arts) the firm implemented a yearlong positive business initiative. This initiative trends to build positive social connections of the employees from 16 different nationalities. Using the data from 221 employees who participated in this initiative, the study empirically examines the role of social connectivity and job engagement in positive change. The main findings are the following: 1) higher level of social connectivity significantly predicts an increase in cognitive, emotional and physical engagement; 2) increase in cognitive, emotional and physical engagement significantly predicts performance; 3) significant indirect effects support the mediating roles of cognitive and physical engagement in the relation between social connectivity and performance. The implication for both theory and practice has also been discussed.

Keywords: positive change; social connectivity; job engagement; international human resource development; Middle East.

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1 Introduction

An organisation's success and failure depends upon a critical understanding of human resource practice (Yamin, 2019). The origin of positive organisational change can be traced to positive organisational scholarship, which refers to the investigation into the positive outcomes, practices, attributes, and changes that occur in organisations and among their members (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014). The four connotations of positive change include

- a focusing on positively deviant performance
- b examining the factors influencing the adoption of a positive perspective
- c impact of virtuousness
- d effects of an affirmative bias (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014).

By adopting a positive perspective, obstacles and challenges are reinterpreted as strength-building experiences and opportunities for positive change rather than as problems or tragedies (Cameron, 2008; Gittel et al., 2006). Assuming an affirmative bias is the second connotation of positive change. This assumption is explained through the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions proposed by Fredrickson (2003). The researcher suggests that positivity helps unlock and elevate resources in both individuals and teams in such a way that their capabilities are broadened and their capacities or resources are built and strengthened (Fredrickson, 2009). Stemming out of the positive psychology movement (Singh et al., 2018), various studies examine positive change with a focus on the development and effects related to virtuousness (Bright et al., 2006). This has a eudemonic assumption, which suggests that there is an inclination among all human

systems to achieve the highest aspiration (Cameron, 2008). The last connotation focuses on positively deviant performance, which involves investigating outcomes that exceed expected performance (Cameron and Lavine, 2006).

Research suggests that individuals with a positive attitude tend to be happy employees (Omar et al., 2019). In this study we examine change in a Middle Eastern financial services firm that implemented various positive practices. By practices the authors imply recurrent, materially bound, and situated activities of a particular unit or organisation (Orlikowski, 2002). Research indicates that organisations where positive practices are implemented show improvements in terms of their profitability, productivity, customer satisfaction, and employee retention (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014). Positive practices like providing compassionate support, forgiving mistakes, expressing gratitude, showing kindness, and fostering meaningfulness and positive relational ties lead to enhanced performance (Cameron, 2008; Cameron et al., 2004; Gittel et al., 2006).

Literature suggests different attributes and practices for positive change. Some examples of these include building psychological strengths, virtuousness, showing social concern, investing in positive relationships, managing energy, and job crafting (Avey et al., 2008; Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014). A four-year-long study at a dangerous nuclear-polluted site is an example of practicing virtuousness for change (Cameron and Lavine, 2006). Practicing virtuousness (forgiveness, compassion, optimism, trustworthiness) leads to positive performance outcomes (Cameron et al., 2011). Both grateful and hopeful individuals were found to be responsible toward other members of their organisation, showing social concern (Andersson et al., 2007).

When leaders adopt positive practices for change, significant outcomes can be produced (Cameron and McNaughtan, 2014). Research on organisational healing suggests that after a harmful experience the leader may help an organisation recover and strengthen by nurturing high-quality connections, fostering compassion, and enhancing the healing process (Powley and Piderit, 2008). Since positive relations are one of the main components of an individual's wellbeing, the enhanced social connectivity of employees might lead to an increase in their job performance (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Individuals who energised others performed higher than even those who played a central role in the network. Thus, energy, interacting, connecting, and networking were identified as important factors that improve performance (Baker et al., 2004; Malik and MacIntosh, 2015).

The expectation of being accepted or being treated like a family (Balkundi and Harrison, 2006; Okhuysen, 2001) affects the behaviour of organisation actors (Maciel and Camargo, 2016). Literature suggests that social connectivity tends to energise individuals (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003), facilitate organisational learning and growth (Dutton and Ragin, 2006), encourage collaboration (Aarrestad et al., 2015), and work engagement (Bakker and Bal, 2010; Freaney and Fellenz, 2013). Though many mechanisms tend to facilitate positive change, the current study examines the role of social connectivity and job engagement in the context of the RACE initiative. This is because social connectivity is a pervasive form of social capital and represents positive deviance (Baker and Dutton, 2007).

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2 RACE: the positive change initiative

Following the global financial crisis, there was an urgent need for change at the focal organisation. The management team developed a positive change initiative named 'RACE', which involved various sports, arts, cultural, and everyday business activities, intended to enhance the level of engagement and social connectivity among members of the organisation (see Appendix for additional details about the initiative). On the basis of the success of the initiative, which generated a positively deviant performance, we decided to examine the nuances of such a positive change.

In this study, we adopt a positive perspective by focusing attention on the generative processes associated with positive change. Research related to 'positive organisational scholarship' suggests that adopting a positive lens helps in interpreting challenges and obstacles as strength-building experiences and opportunities rather than perceiving them as problems or tragedies (Cameron, 2008; Gittell et al., 2006). While the employees of the organisation's competitors were being laid off, the leaders of this organisation decided not to follow suit. Instead, they designed the RACE initiative, including workplace fun activities, to capture the hearts of their employees. The organisation's leaders reinterpreted the challenging situation posed by the financial crisis as an opportunity to build social connectivity and engage their employees by giving them happy moments at work. The positive practices implemented through the RACE initiative focused on building employees' connectivity. It was noted that employees who participated in various activities tend to have higher levels of social connectivity and engagement in their job.

In this study, we assume an affirmative bias, another connotation of positive change. This assumption has been explained by Fredrickson (2003) through the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. Research indicates that positivity helps unlock resources in individuals and teams, so that capabilities are broadened and capacities or resources are built and strengthened (Fredrickson, 2009). Núñez et al. (2018) suggest that teamwork should be promoted in the workplace. During the various RACE events, employees expressed and experienced various positive emotions. They were also presented with opportunities to build physical, psychological, and social resources. By being exposed to positive change through the RACE initiative, the employees could experience an amplifying effect resulting in the expansion of their social resources.

While developing the RACE initiative, leaders tend to integrate this factor for positive change. The participating employees shared a common motto to challenge their limits and pursue excellence. A genuine desire to achieve the utmost was evident among all the participating employees across events. The natural human inclination toward the positive creates an opportunity to investigate the factors that explain and enable positive change.

The RACE initiative leads to positively deviant performance, another key factor in studying positive change. Positively deviant performance is about investigating outcomes that exceed expected performance (Cameron and Lavine, 2006). During the grand finale address, the leaders announced that the RACE initiative led to a double-digit growth in all the key performance indicators. In this study, we propose that employees who participated in the RACE initiative had an opportunity to form social connections and enhance their job engagement. This would have resulted in an increase in performance.

3 Theory and hypotheses

The study, unlike others that focus on the traditional measurement of social network analysis, explores the importance of social connections in the workplace (Baker, 2000; Hanneman and Riddle, 2011; Kadushin, 2012).

3.1 Social connections

‘Human relations at the workplace affecting performance’ has been a long-discussed topic in the fields of psychology (Walton et al., 2012), economics (Bandiera et al., 2009), sociology (Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939; Roy, 1952), and other behavioural sciences. To accomplish tasks at any firm, it is imperative that the employees collaborate to reach their goals collectively. Employees interact and form connections in pursuing the same goal. Social connections are dynamic, living tissues that exist in the interaction between two people, involving mutual awareness (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). The time spent to form connections may be minimal, as in the case of a short interaction, or it may prove to be lengthy. Regardless of the duration of the connection, what matters is its quality or, in other words, its worthiness. These connections tend to be of positive orientation (Baker and Dutton, 2007; Stephens et al., 2011). In fact external network ties are considered an important determinant leading to organisational success (Holtgrave et al., 2019; Tjahjono et al., 2019).

There are a few reasons why social connections are formed in any organisation. First, all human beings have an urge to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968). This need to belong or to search for a connection is focused on the primary need for security and the avoidance of loneliness, isolation, and anguish (Castano, 2013). In the context of the organisation, this need to belong is reflected in activities of social inclusion and acceptance (Maciel and Camargo, 2016). Many relational theories explain the mechanism and relevance of the formation and sustainability of these social connections in an organisation, stating that human growth and development occurs along with other factors, rather than in isolation (Miller and Stiver, 1997). Organisational research on exchange theory emphasises the resource exchange between people (Homans, 1974). Trust and social support lead to positive outcomes for the organisation. The positive, mutually developmental experience of being in social connections is emphasised in the literature (Stephens et al., 2011).

Various capacities are developed on the basis of these social connections. Individuals tend to experience and express a variety of emotions as a result of their social connections. Their ability to withstand the strain and bend in various situations is also enhanced. Further, individuals open up to new ideas with a high level of connectivity. These three capacities build stronger social connections that tend to be generative and beneficial (Stephens et al., 2011). By being a part of these connections, individuals experience a sense of vitality, positive regard, and mutuality. They also tend to participate actively and engage in social connections leading to a movement in and through the connection (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003).

The mental processing of information about others shapes the thoughts on them and the plausible connection formation (Gibson, 1979). This cognition leads to improved actions. Mental processes like other-awareness, impression-formation, and perspective taking are pathways to form social connections (Stephens et al., 2011). In maintaining the

social order and tackling everyday social problems in organisations, emotional aspects of connections also play a vital role. Literature suggests that positive emotions, emotional contagion, and empathy are pathways to form connections (Stephens et al., 2011). Additionally, the behavioural mechanisms of trust, respectful engagement, task enabling, and play contribute significantly in forming social connections (Stephens et al., 2011). Opportunities and support provided by the organisation further help employees to connect at all levels.

Research also suggests the significant impact of social connections at work on performance. Experimental studies indicate that brief interactions with others can improve working memory performance (Ybarra et al., 2008), task-related help (Venkataramani and Dalal, 2007), career transitions (Ibarra, 2003), and recovery from illness (Lilius et al., 2008). Social connections at work may also affect individuals' immune, cardiovascular, and neuroendocrine systems (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008). Studies have also revealed the impact of social connections on psychological safety and trust. This leads to increased learning from failures (Brueller and Carmeli, 2011; Carmeli, 2009; Carmeli et al., 2009; Carmeli and Gittell, 2009). Social connections therefore tend to be useful in the context of organisational change. Thus, the review of literature prompts us to suggest the following:

Hypothesis 1 Higher social connections lead to better performance.

3.2 *Job engagement*

'Role theory' (Goffman, 1951, 1961), suggests that people differ in terms of their attachments to and absorption in their roles. Kahn (1990, p.700) originally described engagement as "the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task behaviours that promote connections to work and others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional) and active, full performances." Engagement implies devoting one's complete self – in terms of physical, cognitive, and emotional energies – to active work roles. Highly engaged employees are found to be psychologically present, attentive, connected, and focused on their role performances. When they are open to themselves and connected to others, engaged employees bring their whole selves to their roles (Kahn, 1992). The investment of physical, emotional, and behavioural energies is exhibited through one's behaviour as a function of engagement.

Schaufeli and Bakker (2003, p.74) conceptualise engagement as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual or behavior." Another view of engagement is investing the 'hands, head, and heart' in performing one's work role [Ashforth and Humphrey, (1995), p.110]. Highly engaged employees invest their physical, emotional, and cognitive energies simultaneously. Drawing from Kahn's original work, Rich et al. (2010, p.619) described job engagement as "a multidimensional motivational concept reflecting the simultaneous investment of an individual's physical, cognitive and emotional energy in active, full work performance", thereby distinguishing it from the related constructs of job involvement and job satisfaction (Rich et al., 2010; Rothbard and Patil, 2011).

Using Kahn's conceptualisation has some benefits: first, it addresses the real attitude, behaviour, and cognition of individuals in their work roles, rather than their antecedents (e.g., as measured by Gallup's work force audit). Second, unlike other conceptualisations

of engagement, which considers it to be the opposite of burnout, this is unique. Third, it is consistent with the suggestions proposed by Kelman (1958) and Campbell (1990), which support a joint investment of physical, emotional, and cognitive energies for better performance.

3.3 Dimensions of engagement

3.3.1 Physical

Employees invest and express themselves in their work roles (Kahn, 1990), exerting physical and mental effort. The main elements of physical engagement are time duration commitment, intensity or force exerted, and direction (Campbell and Pritchard, 1976; Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Effort as time spent is merely reflective of one's role presence and not of one's engagement. Thus, it is also important to consider how hard the individual was trying to accomplish a task (Kanfer, 1990), as this is reflective of the employee's intensity of investing personal resources in his or her work role. Effort measured as intensity is significantly related to performance (Brown and Leigh, 1996).

3.3.2 Cognitive

Cognitive engagement comprises two components: attention and absorption (Rothbard, 2001). Attention is the amount of time one spends thinking about the role task, while absorption is the level of engrossment or intensity of focus on the role task. Other than one's work, there are multiple tasks seeking one's attention, and each individual controls the allocation of his or her cognitive resources (March and Olsen, 1976). Kahn (1990, 1992) describes individuals as being cognitively engaged when they allocate sufficient attention to a work task, despite competition from other sources for this limited resource (Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989). Absorption is a pervasive and persistent state of concentration and focus that resembles intrinsic motivation, which is the desire to associate with an activity for its sake (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Rothbard, 2001).

Self-regulation is a cognitive process that transforms motivational force into behaviour and performance and can be linked to absorption and attention (Kanfer, 1990). Accordingly, individuals regulate their efforts across on-task and off-task activities. The component of self-regulation helps one to engage in the cognitive thought process by paying attention to and being absorbed in his or her work roles. Also research suggests that an individual employee who is cognitively engaged tends to experience a flow state. In this state, an individual experiences absorption and focus on the tasks because the skills needed to accomplish the task and the level of challenge are optimised (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

3.3.3 Emotional

Kahn (1990, 1992) proposed that individuals be engaged in their roles and exhibit the investment of personal energies and emotions. An individual's emotional experience at work results from feelings of enthusiasm, pride, and hostility and can be positive or negative (Watson et al., 1988, 1999). Employees experiencing positive affect are enthusiastic, active, and energised to engage in their work roles, while those experiencing negative affect are distressed, sluggish, dull, and disengaged (Watson and Tellegen,

1985). Both positive and negative affects are independent dispositions, rather than the opposite ends of a scale (Barrett and Russell, 1998; Watson et al., 1999). Research has shown that individuals' emotions influence their job attitudes (Wallbott and Scherer, 1989). Thus, we may conclude that a consideration of cognitive and physical engagement is not complete unless it also takes into account the emotional aspect.

3.4 Social connections and job engagement

Extant literature perceives organisational support as a significant antecedent for job engagement. When employees are given an opportunity to interact and form connections, they perceive their organisation to be supportive. In addition, according to Kahn's (1990) observation, a supportive environment fosters caring and honest relationships, which in turn provides employees a sense of psychological safety that is necessary to engage in their work roles. Further, being a part of social connections might help individuals develop psychological availability – the sense of having physical, emotional, or physiological resources to personally engage in their jobs (Kahn, 1990). Thus, as more resources are exchanged in an organisation, the perception of availability might cause them to become more engaged in their work roles.

Research implies that social connections are positive dyadic interactions at work, marked by a sense of mutuality, vitality, and positive regard (Dutton and Heaphy, 2003). Positive interrelations at work tend to play a significant role in engagement (Baker and Dutton, 2007). When employees have opportunities to form relational ties, a variety of emotions are expressed and experienced over these connections. Employees who experience positive emotions, especially gratitude, might experience enhanced emotional engagement in their work roles, as they are thankful to each other for the day-to-day help received. Additionally, having relational ties with other members of the organisation tends to build one's capacity to be resilient and stay connected. This might further motivate employees to be cognitively and physically engaged in their work roles. Individuals' awareness of others in their organisation creates impressions about them (Stephens et al., 2011). This might cause employees to invest their cognitive energy at work, remaining focused and absorbed in their day-to-day activities. From the above argument explaining the social connection-engagement relationship, we hypothesise the following:

Hypothesis 2a Higher social connections lead to higher physical engagement.

Hypothesis 2b Higher social connections lead to higher cognitive engagement.

Hypothesis 2c Higher social connections lead to higher emotional engagement.

3.5 Job engagement and performance

The concept of engagement reflects human agency; hence, we focus on the behavioural conceptualisation of performance. Highly engaged employees execute their assigned work roles with physical energy, cognitive vigilance, and emotional connection (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Kahn, 1990), while disengaged employees withhold their energies from translating to task activity, acting in ways that are more robotic, passive, and detached (Kahn, 1990). Physical energies allow workers to leverage extra effort and time for better performance (Kahn, 1990), thereby investing more of themselves into the

attainment of organisational goals; thus, hard work tends to be associated with better performance (Brown and Leigh, 1996). Cognitive energies also contribute to organisational goals, promoting behaviour that is more attentive and focused (Kahn, 1990). A reduction in cognitive energy investment is expected to decrease performance (Weick and Roberts, 1993). Emotional energy also relates to performance outcomes, as it promotes positive interpersonal connections among co-workers (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995) and helps employees to meet the emotional demands of their jobs.

Engaged employees invest their physical, emotional, and cognitive energy in performing tasks more meticulously (Borman and Motowidlo, 1993; Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010). They work with greater intensity for a longer period, pay more attention to details, and are focused, in addition to being more emotionally connected to their tasks (Monika, 2019). Investing their whole self in their work roles facilitates superior in-role and extra-role performances by employees (Rich et al., 2010; Saks, 2006), which logically leads to a positive impact of engagement on financial turnover (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Harter et al. (2002) discovered a positive relation between engagement and unit-level performance (e.g., customer satisfaction, production, profitability, employee turnover). Therefore, we expect that all three aspects of engagement will be associated with better performance:

Hypothesis 3a Higher physical engagement leads to better performance.

Hypothesis 3b Higher cognitive engagement leads to better performance.

Hypothesis 3c Higher emotional engagement leads to better performance.

3.6 Mediating role of job engagement in social connectivity and performance

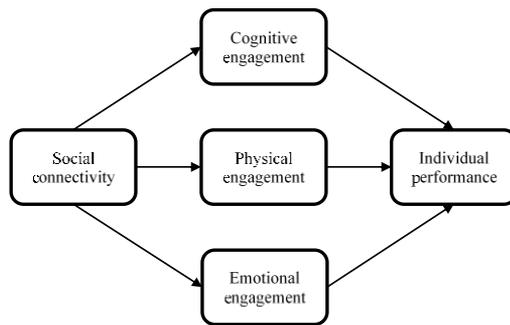
On the basis of the above review of literature, we argue that employees with relational resources will exhibit greater physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement in their work roles leading to enhanced performance. According to the job demands-resources model, work engagement has a positive impact on job performance. Employees who are engaged and perform well are able to create their own resources, which then foster engagement again, over time creating a positive gain spiral (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). Also the initiatives introduced by an organisation tend to play an important role in this context (Delina and Samuel, 2020). Thus, on the basis of the available literature, we propose a model (see Figure 1) in which physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement mediates the relationship between social connections and performance. Prior research indicates a positive relationship between social connections and performance (Cross et al., 2002). In this study, we argue that engagement plays a significant mediating role in explaining this relationship.

Hypothesis 4a Physical engagement mediates the relationship between social connections and performance.

Hypothesis 4b Cognitive engagement mediates the relationship between social connections and performance.

Hypothesis 4c Emotional engagement mediates the relationship between social connections and performance.

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Figure 1 Conceptual model

4 Methods

4.1 Participants and procedure

The questionnaire-based data were collected from employees of a multinational financial services firm located in the UAE. At the time of data collection, all the employees had participated in a positive business initiative called 'RACE', which involved various sports, arts, cultural, and everyday business activities, intended to enhance social connectivity and employee engagement (see Appendix). Before administering the questionnaire, the heads of 99 UAE-based branch offices of the firm were informed about the objectives of the study and how it would be undertaken; they were assured of the absolute confidentiality of the responses and the participants. With the help of these branch heads, the survey was conducted during work hours. Participants provided their informed consent.

Of the 954 people invited to participate in the study, 221 employees completed the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 23.26%. Study sample comprised 80.9% males and 19.1% females. The mean age of the respondents was 30.9 years, and their organisational tenure ranged from one to seven years, with an average of 3.87 years. Concerning education, all the respondents were at least high school graduates. While all of the respondents were based in the UAE, the sample was international, with 16 home countries represented.

4.2 Measures

Individual respondents – all employees of the firm – were asked to self-assess their social connectivity, cognitive engagement, physical engagement, emotional engagement, and performance. A prefix, 'since the introduction of RACE', was added to all the study items to provide a time frame and make the context clearer to the employees. Responses were collected using a seven-point Likert scale, with the following categories: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree, and 7 = strongly agree.

4.2.1 Social connectivity

A measure for social connectivity was developed using the positive relationships at work theory (Baker and Dutton, 2007; Carmeli et al., 2008; Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Stephens et al., 2011) based on the organisational context. To determine the validity and reliability of the measure, a pilot test was conducted. A list of five scale items was prepared, which was distributed to three experts to assess the face validity; the experts comprised one professor in organisational behaviour, one member of the RACE organising committee, and one of the leaders of the organisation. Sample items included, “I have formed positive connections with members of different branches”, and “I have opportunities to connect with peers from different branches.”

After receiving the feedback, a pilot-test was conducted for the social connectivity measure by testing it on 50 employees who participated in the RACE initiative. Responses were collected on the basis of a seven-point Likert-type scale. The coefficient alpha for the pilot study was 0.79. The exploratory factor analysis, with Promax rotation, yielded a clear pattern matrix with all the items loading on a single factor. As satisfactory results were found in the pilot test to determine the validity and reliability of the social connectivity measure, this measure was utilised in the final study (n = 221). The coefficient alpha for the final study was 0.81, with a clear pattern matrix in exploratory factor analysis with Promax rotation.

4.2.2 Job engagement

The self-rated version of the job engagement questionnaire (Rich et al., 2010) was used to measure engagement. The job engagement questionnaire draws from various scales – cognitive engagement (Rothbard, 2001), physical engagement (Brown and Leigh, 1996), and emotional engagement (Russell and Barrett, 1999) – to measure the dimensions of job engagement and has been demonstrated to have reliability and construct validity (Rich et al., 2010). Three items each of cognitive, physical, and emotional engagement were adopted for this study. Sample items included: “I am focused on my job” (cognitive engagement), “I work with intensity on my job” (physical engagement), and “I am enthusiastic in my job” (emotional engagement).

Exploratory factor analysis, with Promax rotation yielded a clear three-factor pattern, with the items all loading on the expected factors. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), using a maximum likelihood method, indicated adequate fit indices for the three-factor structure, with items loading significantly ($p < 0.001$) on their respective dimensions; the standardised regression loadings ranged from 0.81 to 0.95 and all were highly significant ($p < 0.001$). The model fit indices for the first-order CFA were $\chi^2 = 41.87$, CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, IFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.05, and SRMR = 0.03. The coefficient alpha was 0.85, 0.84 and 0.89, respectively, for emotional, cognitive, and physical engagement.

4.2.3 Performance

Four items were adopted from a measure developed by Welbourne et al. (1998) for individual employee performance. Sample items included: “the quantity of work has improved”, “the quality of work has improved”, and “the timeliness of work has improved.” Exploratory factor analysis, with Promax rotation, yielded a clear single-factor. The Cronbach’s α for the performance measure was 0.86.

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4.2.4 Controls

The demographic control variables included in the study were employee age, gender, and work experience.

5 Results

5.1 Descriptive statistics

Means, standard deviations, reliability α s, and correlations among the variables are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations matrix

	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Social connectivity	5.63	1.08	(.90)						
2. Cognitive Engagement	6.02	1.02	.27**	(.87)					
3. Physical Engagement	5.76	1.19	.31**	.46**	(.92)				
4. Emotional Engagement	6.09	1.10	.25**	.63**	.51**	(.89)			
5. Individual Performance	5.40	1.28	.38**	.42**	.45**	.44**	(.92)		
6. Gender	1.19	.39	.08	-.08	-.02	-.06	-.00		
7. Age	30.9	3.80	-.06	.02	.03	.14*	.01	.05	
8. Tenure	3.87	1.73	-.08	.03	-.08	.05	-.04	-.01	.45**

Notes. n = 221. Reliability coefficient for the scales are in parentheses along the diagonal. Gender: 1= male, 2= female. Tenure: denotes years.

** Correlations significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), p < .01 and * Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), p < .05

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5.2 Measurement models

Owing to the fact that the data were collected from a single source (i.e., the employees) at one point, a check for the potential of common method variance was done. Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) was conducted, which is mostly used for this purpose. All items were first loaded on to one factor in an exploratory factor analysis to examine whether a single factor accounts for the majority of the covariance. Results found that the first factor did not account for the majority of the variance among the measures.

Further, in structural equation modelling, an unmeasured latent factor was created, connecting all self-reported items to this latent factor and constraining all the paths from this latent factor to be equal. The regression coefficients generated from this latent factor was squared and it was observed that only 2.15% of the variance could be attributed to this unmeasured common factor. Furthermore, the relationship between the study variables was still highly significant ($p < 0.001$) when this unmeasured latent factor was retained in the model. Combined with the assurances of confidentiality offered by one of the authors, who has strong credibility in the organisation, this result implied that common method bias was not a substantial concern for this study. Thus, it is unlikely that the findings can be explained by common method variance.

To demonstrate the validity of the measures through composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and maximum shared variance (MSV), an analysis using CFA was conducted. Using threshold values for reliability, $CR > 0.7$; convergent

validity, $CR > AVE$ and $AVE > 0.5$; and discriminant validity, $MSV < AVE$ (Hair et al., 2009), the reliability and validity of the study measures was established (see Table 2).

Table 2 Discriminant validity

	<i>CR</i>	<i>AVE</i>	<i>MSV</i>
SC	0.90	0.65	0.16
PE	0.92	0.80	0.28
CE	0.87	0.70	0.52
EmE	0.89	0.72	0.52
Perf	0.92	0.74	0.21

Notes: CR – composite reliability; AVE – average variance extracted; MSV – maximum shared variance; SC – social connectivity; PE – physical engagement; CE – cognitive engagement; EmE – emotional engagement; Perf – individual performance.

Table 3 presents the CFA results from estimating the model shown in Figure 1. The five-factor model, including social connectivity, cognitive engagement, physical engagement, emotional engagement, and performance, demonstrated good fit with the data, based on the $\chi^2 = 208.07$, CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, IFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.05 and SRMR = 0.05 values. Four alternate models against this baseline: a four-factor model in which social connectivity is merged with cognitive engagement to form a single factor (model 1), another four-factor model in which social connectivity is merged with physical engagement (model 2), yet another four-factor model in which social connectivity is merged with emotional engagement (model 3), and a single factor model in which all factors are merged were tested. The fit indices that are shown in Table 3 support the use of the originally proposed five-factor model, providing evidence of construct distinctiveness among social connectivity, cognitive engagement, physical engagement, emotional engagement, and performance.

Table 3 Comparison of measurements models

Model	Factors	χ^2	<i>df</i>	$\Delta \chi^2$	<i>CFI</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>CI</i>
Baseline	Five factors	208.07	125		0.97	0.96	0.05	.04-.06
Alternative Model 1	Four factors. Combined SC and CE as one factor.	628.43	129	420.36	0.83	0.77	0.13	.12-.14
Model 2	Four factors. Combined SC and PE as one factor.	725.09	129	517.02	0.80	0.73	0.14	.13-.15
Model 3	Four factors. Combined SC and EmE as one factor.	680.86	129	472.79	0.81	0.75	0.13	.12-.15
Model 4	One factors. All combined.	1701.60	135	61.32	0.41	0.42	0.22	.21-.23

n = 221. SC, social connectivity; CE, cognitive engagement; PE, physical engagement; EmE, emotional engagement; CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker-Lewis fit index; RMSEA, root-mean-square error of approximation; 90% CI, 90% RMSEA confidence interval. All χ^2 and $\Delta \chi^2$ values are $p < 0.001$. Delta values are differences of each of the alternative models with the hypothesized model.

5.3 Tests of hypotheses

To test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, structural equation modelling was used, and to test Hypothesis 4a bootstrapped indirect effect (IE) analysis was conducted (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). All variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below standard cut-offs

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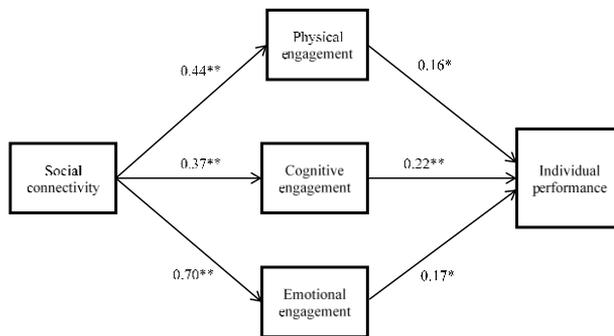
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(i.e., VIF 1.34), which suggested that multicollinearity might not be an issue. The fit indices demonstrate goodness of model fit with the data, based on $\chi^2 = 377.14$, $p < 0.01$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.88, IFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.09 values. Hypothesis 1 predicted that social connectivity would be positively and directly related to performance. Figure 2 presents the standardised path coefficients, and the results indicate a significant direct link from social connectivity to performance ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$).

Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c predicted that social connectivity would be positively related to physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement, respectively. The results indicate significant positive links from social connectivity to physical engagement ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$), cognitive engagement ($\beta = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$), and emotional engagement ($\beta = 0.70$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c are supported by these findings. Hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c predicted that physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement, respectively, would be positively related to performance. As shown in Figure 2, physical engagement ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.05$), cognitive engagement ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$), and emotional engagement ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$) are all significantly related to performance. Therefore, though Hypotheses 3a and 3c are moderately supported, Hypothesis 3b is well supported by the study findings.

Figure 2 Structural model



To test Hypotheses 4a, 4b, and 4c social connectivity as the independent variable, physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement as the mediating variables (MVs), and performance as the dependent variable were specified in a mediation analysis using the SPSS process model 4 (Hayes, 2013). A test was conducted to show that each of the three MVs reliably mediated the social connectivity and performance link. Study estimated the IE and the mediation effect size (ES) of social connectivity on performance via, physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement. The study accepted the IE as significant if its bias-corrected 95% CI (from 5,000 bootstraps re-samples) excluded zero.

IEs of social connectivity on performance were observed via physical engagement (IE = 0.08; 95% CI: 0.02, 0.20; ES = 0.18), cognitive engagement (IE = 0.05; 95% CI: 0.01, 0.12; ES = 0.10), and emotional engagement (IE = 0.05; 95% CI: -0.00, 0.13; ES = 0.11) as mediators. The results reveal that physical and cognitive engagement significantly mediated the relationship between social connectivity and performance,

supporting Hypotheses 4a and 4b. However, emotional engagement did not support Hypothesis 4c as the 95% confidence interval included a zero.

6 Discussion

The study examined the role of the three dimensions of job engagement—that is, physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement—in the link between positive relationships at work and performance. Results suggested a positive relation between social connections and performance, significantly mediated by physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Further investigation into the nature of the mediation effect indicated that physical and cognitive engagement significantly mediate the social connection-performance link. These findings have both theoretical and practical implications. With respect to theoretical contribution the findings suggest that there is a need to revisit the social network theory with a view to explore the role of social connections in the workplace. For human resource practitioners, findings of the study suggest that social connection in the workplace has the potential to contribute significantly towards work being perceived as meaningful by employees, for providing a sense of appreciation, safety, and positive conditions at work. Thus, it is a potential tool in the hands of organisational actors.

In a recent study by Maciel and Camargo (2016), engagement was measured along physical, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. However, results suggested that cognitive engagement was influenced by intra-organisational social connections to protect oneself from isolation, anguish, and loneliness (Castano, 2013) unlike physical and emotional engagement. This study, however, provides support that there is a positive impact of social connections on physical and cognitive engagement. This collectivist tendency generates a sense of safety and belonging. The act of being welcomed and accepted by co-workers or being treated like a family by the organisation (Balkundi and Harnson, 2006; Okhuysen, 2001) has a positive effect on employees.

The main contribution of this study is to suggest that engagement is not a factor restricted to the nature of the job or to demographic variables but to the role of social ties. This is also reflected in ‘social theory’ (Granovetter, 1985). The findings of this study not only answer the call to investigate the potential mediating mechanisms underlying the social capital-performance relation, but also highlight the need to focus on developing social connections. The context of this study, with data collected soon after the completion of a year-long positive organisational initiative, suggests that social connections can be developed through consciously designed and implemented workplace programs that encourage employees to connect with members of their organisation.

Informal settings, such as sports and arts-related events, may allow individuals to feel comfortable about expressing themselves. These act as local ties with the potential to positively impact an individual’s behaviour. This finds a reflection in the theoretical framework of the study. In a scenario such as the RACE initiative, employees have ongoing opportunities to form connections with members of their organisation. The conversion of routine jobs into games may make employees more likely to engage, investing their physical, cognitive, and emotional energies into the tasks (Mollick and Rothbard, 2014). In this service-sector multinational enterprise, this process was reflected in the increase in core business performance indices at the branch level, including remittance count and foreign exchange margins, despite a very negative global

environment for the sector. Our findings suggest that the formation of positive relational ties can be strengthened through positive business practices in the workplace.

Like all empirical research, our study is subject to some limitations. First, we considered data only for the period immediately following the RACE initiative, meaning that in this study authors were unable to conduct a pre and post analysis to examine the impact of the positive business practices in developing social connections at work in greater detail. Also information regarding the improved outcome in terms of performance following RACE, based on access to both data on the main outcomes and interviews with senior managers; during this period, this financial-services company experienced growth and improvement despite the effects of the global financial crisis were indicated. However, this study's *post hoc* data collection regarding social connections and job engagement limits the ability to assert causality.

Also, owing to the study's cross-sectional nature, the possibility of reverse causality cannot be ruled out, given that all the data was gathered at one time. For example, individuals who perceive their branch to be high performing may be more likely to develop social connections easily. However, to begin to address this issue, authors again did the bootstrapped IE analysis in reverse order with performance predicting social connectivity through physical, cognitive, and emotional engagement. The 95% confidence intervals included zeros – they were [-0.03 -0.29], [-0.13 -0.35], and [-0.25 -0.20], respectively – providing some support the causal direction of the model.

Despite these limitations, the study findings not only contribute to both theory and practice by providing further support for the importance of developing positive relationships at work through positive business practices, but also demonstrate, empirically, that the previously unexplored mediating mechanism of job engagement underlies the social connection–performance link. Specifically, this study indicates that social connections are related to performance both directly and through the mediating role of job engagement.

The authors conclude that social connectivity has a positive impact on the degree of engagement and job performance of individual employees of a firm. Intra-organisational social connection operates like local ties, which have the potentiality to generate positive effect on an individual's workplace behaviour. The results showed that physical and cognitive engagement acts as a mediator in enhancing performance. The study contributes to the goal of more comprehensively understanding the link between social connections and performance, as well as its mediators in the context of a workplace comprising a highly multinational workforce.

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Appendix

Organisational context and 'RACE' the positive initiative

This study was conducted in the context of a single organisation – a leading global remittance firm with operations in 31 countries across 5 continents and with more than 800 branches. The firm serves more than 3,000,000 customers around the world and is one of the largest remittance companies in the Middle East. The core financial transfer services provided by the company include the worldwide remittance of funds, provision of demand drafts in various currencies, and international retail and bulk trade. The company's portfolio of services includes draft checks, express transfers, and the purchase and sale of foreign currency bank notes.

The 2008 subprime mortgage crisis in the US affected financial firms on a global scale. For this organisation, the increasingly challenging business environment led to a decline in almost all measures of business and market performance. In 2009, the company developed a strategy aimed at improving customer satisfaction and revenue maximisation. The following year, the focus was on cost optimisation, and in 2011 it launched a positive initiative, called 'RACE'.

The RACE initiative comprised a series of activities including business initiatives, cultural events, and sports and games. Designed to motivate employees and create a more positive environment in the organisation, the RACE initiative served as a platform to enhance social connectivity among the company's employees. Participants also experienced, and expressed, a variety of positive emotions during the different events. In addition, the business events provided opportunities for participating employees to set goals, invest their energies, and strive toward achieving them. The firm's top management is certain that this yielded great value to the organisation in terms of enhanced sales, income, and profits.

The RACE initiative had four major events: 'marathon', 'hurdles', 'sprint', and 'relay'. The marathon, as a long-term 'event' that would require both strength and determination, pertained to daily business parameters; its 18 items addressed issues

related to the financial, compliance, production, and operations fields, effectively representing a balanced scorecard approach. The marathon involved the allocation of both absolute and comparative points to co-located teams on a regular (monthly or bimonthly) basis. Some of the activities included in the marathon were income, remittance, foreign currency margin, cost-to-income ratio, branch productivity, and staff deployment.

The second event, hurdles, was concerned with the various business initiatives of the company, and had points allocated on a bimonthly basis. This aspect of the RACE initiative was planned to give momentum to the business aspects that were experiencing lower-than-desired growth. Hurdles encouraged teams to take a leap, jump over barriers, and best the firm's competitors in the market. Some of the events in the hurdles competition were 'currency carnival' (aimed at augmenting foreign currency margins and accounts) and 'account credit' (to improve account credit counts in specific sectors).

Sprint, the third major event, had a very different focus: a short spell of speed and activity, based on sports. The main objective behind sprint was to develop employees' sports-related capabilities. Sprint events were conducted monthly, with the winning teams from each month playing again in the finals at the end of the year. The sporting activities of sprint included cricket, football, basketball, badminton, chess, and carrom.

Finally, the fourth event, relay, was a platform designed to showcase individuals' artistic flair. Conducted monthly, the ten relay activities included group songs, debates, quizzes, and photography. A mega-event was held at the end of the year to determine the grand winners of each activity. The RACE initiative was implemented by forming seven teams, based on the geographic distribution of branches within the UAE. Each of the areas had clusters of 10–12 branches, which were grouped on the basis of business potential, performance, and geographic proximity. The seven teams competed with each other in the four major events.

A website was created for the initiative on the firm's intranet, to serve as the central portal for event details, venues, and other information. There were several activities under these four major events. Each area formed a team, comprising 10–20 employees, for each activity (e.g., group dance as part of relay). Participation in any event of the RACE initiative was entirely discretionary, and volunteers from the head office formed the coordination committee for the various events. For each activity under the four events (marathon, hurdles, sprint, and relay), the seven teams competed against each other to gain both absolute and comparative points, and the winners were awarded prizes and trophies in the grand finale.