

Article

Exploring Talent Management Strategies and Psychological Contract Fulfillment for Enhancing Employee Engagement in the Middle Eastern Hotel Industry

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Abstract

The hospitality industry faces increasing challenges in retaining employees, enhancing employee engagement, and ensuring long-term organizational sustainability. There is ample quantitative research regarding employee engagement and talent management; however, there is a lack of qualitative evidence demonstrating how employee engagement can be sustained in the Middle East's hospitality industry through the fulfillment of the psychological contract. This study examines how talent management and the fulfillment of the psychological contract contribute to the employee engagement of hotel organizations within the Middle East. The study was designed with an inductive qualitative methodology based on the Psychological Contract Theory and utilized semi-structured interviews with 37 hotel managers, human resource directors, chief executive officers (CEOs), and general managers of four- and five-star hotels from nine Middle Eastern countries. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo software. Participants identified psychological contract fulfillment as a primary relational mechanism supporting employee engagement, organizational commitment, and workforce retention. They identified that organizational support, transparent communication, responsive leadership, development opportunities, and employee-focused HRM practices strengthened trust and organizational commitment. The findings reconceptualize talent management as a relational and psychologically embedded organizational mechanism supporting employee engagement and workforce sustainability.

Keywords: employee engagement; hospitality management; hotel industry; Middle East; organizational support; psychological contract fulfillment; qualitative analysis; talent management



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1. Introduction

The hospitality industry is known to be a labor-intensive service sector because customer satisfaction and quality of service depend to a great extent on the employees' skills, motivation, emotional labor, and abilities to adapt and behave appropriately (Baum, 2015, 2019; Kusluvan et al., 2010). Furthermore, since hospitality organizations are full of competition and uncertainties, it becomes very important for every employer in this sector to have effective human resource management strategies which can encourage their employees' retention and engagement as well ensure operation of the organization in the long run (Baum et al., 2020; Chiang et al., 2014).

Thus, employee engagement and talent management are two major topics within the hospitality discipline. The previous literature has discussed employee engagement mainly in terms of work resources, incentives, career prospects, and performance systems (Albrecht et al., 2015; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Karatepe, 2013), while several other works put the emphasis on trust, organizational support, justice, psychological safety, and reciprocity between employees and employers (Guest, 2017; Saks, 2022; Frazier et al., 2017). Also, recent publications indicate that research on employee engagement is still rather heterogeneous regarding its methods, results, and contexts (Andrić et al., 2023; Priyashantha et al., 2023).

The fulfillment of the psychological contract provides valuable insights into relational processes mentioned earlier. Psychological contracts relate to the belief of employees regarding the obligations involved in the employment relationship such as predictability of treatment, support from organizations, personal growth and development, effective communication, and good responses from superiors (Rousseau, 1995; Guest, 2004). Positive perceptions on the honoring of these obligations will lead to higher levels of trust, commitment, and engagement while negative perception may cause dissatisfaction and intention of leaving jobs (Guest, 2017; Saks, 2022; Kurtessis et al., 2017).

The hospitality sector in the Middle East has good examples of situations of interest. The hotels in the region are often confronted with the aspects of changing demands in tourism, instability in the labor market, and the complexities associated with the region (Baum et al., 2020; Manolopoulos et al., 2022; Yacoub & ElHajjar, 2021; Ozdemir et al., 2021; Mousa et al., 2023). At the moment, employees will not only base their judgments on formal employment conditions but also the relational messages such as support, fairness, communication, and trust (Saks, 2022; Wonda et al., 2024).

While the studies on hospitality have furthered our understanding of talent management and employee engagement, in many cases the research findings remain quantitative and single-country-based. Not much more knowledge has been generated by qualitative studies of talent management in the Middle East where the roots of psychological contract fulfillment lie (F. Hassanein & Özgit, 2022; Collings et al., 2022; Sinisterra et al., 2024). This gap is significant because the perception of senior managers shapes the implementation of the HRM activities, communication styles, and development initiatives in organizations.

Thus, the present research investigates the influence of psychological contract fulfillment and talent management strategies on employee engagement in hotels located in the region. The study is built on data obtained through semi-structured interviews with 37 top hospitality managers in four- and five-star hotels located in nine countries. The research adopts the qualitative method relying on Psychological Contract Theory as the main conceptual framework supported by the Social Exchange Theory, Conservation of Resources Theory, and Job Demands–Resource model to reveal how relational and resource-oriented practices support engagement in hospitality environments facing uncertainty. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do talent management strategies contribute to psychological contract fulfillment in Middle Eastern hotel organizations?
2. How do managers perceive the role of psychological contract fulfillment in employee engagement and retention?
3. What types of organizational practices build reciprocal relationships and employee trust in the context of hotels that are sensitive to uncertainty?

This study makes three contributions to the hospitality HRM literature. First, it presents employee engagement as a relational outcome from psychological contract fulfillment, perceived organizational support, and reciprocative employee–organization relationships. Second, it provides qualitative multi-country evidence in the Middle East, which

is underrepresented in talent management and employee engagement research. Third, it reconceptualizes talent management as an employee-centered and relational HRM mechanism through which supportive leaders, clear communication, development opportunities and organizational care can enhance trust, commitment and workforce sustainability of hotel organizations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

2.1.1. The Psychological Contract Theory

Psychological Contract Theory explains how employees appraise the implicit and explicit obligations that characterize their relationship with a particular organization (Rousseau, 1995). The obligations are those that employees consider ought to be fair treatment, opportunity to develop a career, recognition, organizational support, transparent communication practices, and responsive managers. Fulfillment occurs when the perception that the organization has kept its promises and expected obligations exists, breach occurs when the promised or expected obligations of a psychological contract are not met (Rousseau, 1995; Guest, 2004; Conway & Briner, 2005). In the context of hospitality organizations, psychological contract fulfillment is particularly relevant since employees often work in an environment of emotional labor, extended working hours, customer pressure, and uncertainty. Employee support, fairness, training, communication, and managerial responsiveness all develop trust, commitment to the organization, engagement, and intention to remain (Guest, 2017; Saks, 2022; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Psychological Contract Theory is the principal lens through which we explain how employees may interpret talent management and organizational support as indicators of employer commitment.

2.1.2. Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) similarly explains employee–organization relationships in terms of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When employees recognize that the organization supports them, treats them fairly, acknowledges their value, and invests in their development, they will respond with engagement, loyalty, discretionary effort and commitment. Perceived organizational support strengthens this reciprocal exchange because employees use support as a cue to conclude that the organization values their contribution and cares for their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Kurtessis et al., 2017). In hospitality organizations where employees deliver service under challenging conditions, training, mentoring, recognition and career development may therefore act as organizational signals supporting reciprocal commitment, engagement and workforce stability (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; McDonnell et al., 2017).

2.1.3. Job Demands–Resources Model

How can we explain employee engagement? The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model does this by explaining how engagement is a function of the interplay between job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023). Job demands have been identified as the physical, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained effort or skill, the outcome of which may be a physiological or psychological cost. Job resources are the physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that may reduce job demands and their associated costs, and/or stimulate personal growth and development (p. 10). In hospitality, employees face emotional labor, demanding customers, fluctuating workloads, and pressure to keep operations

running smoothly. Supportive leadership, mentoring, transparent communication, training, recognition, professional development, and employee voice facilitate a reduction in strain and help to sustain motivation, resilience, engagement, and job performance in demanding service environments (Karatepe, 2013; Albrecht et al., 2015).

2.1.4. Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory is based on the proposition that individuals (for example employees) strive to obtain, protect, and preserve resources central to their emotional, psychological, social, and professional functioning and well-being (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). These are central to individuals' sense of security; individuals are therefore sensitive to social-psychological conditions which threaten their emotional well-being and social standing, a vulnerability which in the workplace degrades work engagement potential. In the hospitality role, employees find they often have to shoulder some responsibilities of emotional labor, changing workloads, customer demand, and operational uncertainty. Ways in which organizations can assist employees to not lose ground emotionally to their work (and thus to cope with such losses) include leadership responsiveness, opportunities for mentoring, transparent communication, suggestions and development, and a strong accompaniment of psychological safety (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017; Hobfoll et al., 2018). In particular, how supportive organizational environments support positive employee productivity, resilience, psychological well-being (hibernating from operation sleep during the busy period) and sustainable engagement is explained in part via COR.

2.2. Psychological Contract Fulfillment in HRM

Psychological contract fulfillment concerns employees' conviction that the organization has upheld its implicit and explicit promises of employment (Rousseau, 1995; Ho, 2005; Karatepe et al., 2021; Guest, 2004; Khaliq et al., 2019). This can refer to whether employees feel supported, treated fairly, developed, recognized, and informed in HRM; fulfillment is tied with attitudes of trust, commitment, engagement, organizational citizenship behaviors, and intentions to stay, while breach threatens trust and builds withdrawal and turnover intentions (Conway & Briner, 2005; Zhao et al., 2007; Guest, 2017; Khaliq et al., 2019; Saks, 2022).

Psychological contract fulfillment is particularly relevant within hospitality where employees are faced with emotional labor, long hours, customer pressure, job and employment position uncertainty. Transparent communication, devoted leaders, employee growth, and fair conduct tend to help employees construe the employment relationship as reliable and mutual (Saks, 2006; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017). What is less clearly explained is how hospitality managers design and express contractual obligations through everyday HRM and leadership behaviors; we emphasize a Middle Eastern hotel context.

2.3. Talent Management as Relational HRM Practice

Talent management has evolved from a narrow focus on recruitment and selection, succession planning and workforce optimization toward a more broadly defined relational HRM practice aimed at fostering employee development, recognition, mentoring, leadership development and retention (Vardi & Collings, 2023; Collings et al., 2015, 2019; Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; McDonnell et al., 2017). From a psychological contract perspective, these practices constitute a form of 'people management' that figures on the organization's part to signal care and long-term commitment to employees and their skill development (De Boeck et al., 2018; Poisat et al., 2018).

In hospitality organizations, this more relational development of talent management is especially pertinent to engaging employees who are critical to service quality and customer

experience. Training, mentoring, recognition, supportive leadership and opportunities for career advancement may operate to strengthen perceptions of organizational support, trust and commitment-development (Hughes & Rog, 2008; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017; Menezes et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024; Tej et al., 2021). And yet, talent management research has only recently started to give qualitative attention to understanding how managers employ the practices that sustain commitments in the form of psychological contracts, thereby enabling engagement in service environments characterized by uncertainty (Collings et al., 2022; Thunnissen et al., 2013; Dries, 2013; Vardi & Collings, 2023).

2.4. Employee Engagement and Organizational Reciprocity

Employee engagement has a more positive rather than a negative connotation and is usually described as a pleasurable, positive state of work-related well-being characterized by dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Chiang et al., 2014; Kahn, 1990). Engaged employees are more liable to be committed, be service-oriented, display proactive behavior, and be willing to exert high quality of effort in their work to benefit organizational performance (Bailey et al., 2017; Albrecht et al., 2015). Moreover, while earlier studies of engagement emphasized motivational aspects at the individual level and psychological conditions for engagement (Kahn, 1990), recent perspectives describe them in terms of the relational aspect of a set of leaders' behaviors, support, communication, justice, and trust (Edmondson, 1999; Saruhan, 2013; Cho & Park, 2011; Saks, 2006, 2022).

In services industries and hospitality in particular, engagement is seen as crucial to mutual engagement in reciprocal organizational relationships because high quality service on the frontlines is contingent on the employee's emotional and behavioral contribution to service encounters (Karatepe, 2013; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017). Employees are likely to reciprocate with commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, discretionary effort, and intention-to-stay for fair treatment received and perceived instrumental viability of support and investment in them as employees (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Kiazad et al., 2019; Sheehan et al., 2019). A recent review confirmed the positive link between engagement with creativity, performance, well-being, commitment, turnover, and organizational effectiveness. It called for more qualitative studies to help advance knowledge of employee engagement in a variety of backgrounds including cross-cultural settings, among others (Andrić et al., 2023; Priyashantha et al., 2023).

2.5. Sustainable HRM and Organizational Support

Closely associated with the idea of positive workplaces and social responsibility is the notion of sustainable HRM, "developing human capital across generations of employees" (Ehnert et al., 2016, p. 237; Podgorodnichenko et al., 2020). This implies HRM policies and procedures that "not only enable employee prosperity near term, but they translate into long term employee well-being and employability, workforce stability and even organizational sustainability" (Kramar, 2022, p. 106). Such a perspective is relevant in a high turnover industry like hospitality where organizations struggle with employee emotional labor and reaction to high turnover and workforce instability (Baum, 2018; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2017; F. Hassanein et al., 2024). Supportive leader behaviors, transparency, employee voice, psychological safety, development and training opportunities, or even perceptions of support from the organization can be fulfilling and contribute to trust, engagement, and workforce resilience (Eisenberger et al., 2016; F. R. Hassanein et al., 2025; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Mariappanadar, 2020). In terms of the psychological contract perspective, employees who perceive their organization as honoring its obligations regarding fairness, employee growth, support, and general employee well-being may reciprocate with commitment and

employee engagement. This sustainable HRM perspective may assist us in developing the employee-centered contributors to engagement and workforce sustainability in hotels in the Middle East.

2.6. Thematic Overview

Our review shows that employee engagement in hospitality is influenced by relational and resource processes. Talent management practices, such as mentoring, leadership development, career advancement, recognition, and organizational support, signal organizational care, fairness, and commitment to employees' long-term growth (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; McDonnell et al., 2017).

Psychological Contract Theory explains how employees interpret these signals; when organizations meet obligations around support, fairness, communication, and development, employees are more likely to develop trust, commitment, and positive work attitudes (Rousseau, 1995; Guest, 2017). Perceived contract breach, however, threatens trust and weakens reciprocal commitment. Psychological contract fulfillment thus represents an important mechanism linking talent management practices to employee engagement.

Social Exchange Theory helps explain how this occurs through reciprocity; employees who perceive organizational support and fair treatment are more likely to respond with engagement, loyalty, organizational commitment, and discretionary effort (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This is especially relevant for hotels, where employee attitudes influence service quality, customers' experience, and organizational performance.

The JD-R model and Conservation of Resources Theory are resources-based views that bring in a resource-based explanation; in demanding hospitality environments, supportive leaders, clear lines of communication, mentoring programs, training, and psychological safety help employees to preserve their emotional and psychological resources and stay engaged (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Hobfoll et al., 2018). From the sustainable HRM perspective, they also help employees to "stay put" and be resilient, thus contribute to sustainability (Ehnert et al., 2016; Kramar, 2022).

These perspectives suggest then that talent management assists in fostering employee engagement through psychological contract fulfillment, sense of organizational support, and reciprocal employee–organization relationships. We will explore how hotel managers in the Middle East understand and make use of these processes in recruitment and employee retention.

3. Research Design

3.1. Methodology

This study used a qualitative exploratory inductive approach, to explore how talented individuals and also managers themselves interpret talent management, psychological contract fulfillment, employee engagement, organizational support and retention through their own experiences of managing these processes in their organizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Myers, 2019). A qualitative approach was appropriate as we sought to understand relational meanings, managerial interpretations, and organizational phenomena rather than to test a theory (Saunders et al., 2019).

The primary source of data consisted of interviews with senior hotel managers, HR managers or HR directors, general managers and/or chief executive officers. The participants were selected from four- and five-star hotels in Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Oman using purposive sampling, as these managers had direct responsibility for talent management, development of workforce capability, retention of workforce capability and organizational support practices (Patton, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This research setting was appropriate to study,

as hotels in this region operate in conditions of uncertainty, competitive mobility of the workforce, pressure operations, emotional labor and employee retention challenges.

The interviews form the basis of the data and allowed participants to explain their practice, social world, and perceptions (their managerial experience). The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) phases of familiarization, generation of initial codes, generation of themes, reviewing themes, and re-reading data for implement ability, and NVivo was used to aid organization of data. While coding was undertaken inductively “from the ground up” directly from participants accounts, our interpretation of these themes was informed in part by Psychological Contract Theory, Social Exchange Theory, the Job Demands–Resources model, and Conservation of Resources. This process allowed analysis to draw close to the narratives that participants have provided, but when linking our findings to more formalized discussions about HRM and employee engagement, we move toward touch points with these theories.

As we have utilized senior manager accounts only, and do not claim direct employee data per se, we present our findings as managers’ understanding of employee engagement, psychological contract fulfillment, organizational commitment and retention, having drawn limits that are useful in understanding avenues for further research—particularly multi-source rather than two-source.

3.2. Thematic Analysis Framework

The thematic analysis framework was developed based on four connecting overall themes that emerged from the theoretical framework and purpose of this study and are linked together through this organizational context. Talent management, organizational support, psychological contract fulfillment, and employee engagement are four important areas for analysis using data from interviews with hospitality organization managers. Although these four areas were driven by the literature and research objectives, they emerged from participant data through iterative coding, constant comparison, and thematic refinement (inductive categorization). This approach allowed the analysis to be grounded in participants’ experiences while connecting to the theoretical framework of the study.

Based on the findings from the data analysis, the thematic analysis provided a clear and robust structure for presenting recurring themes from the interviews of the participants and was categorized into global themes of talent management, psychological contract fulfillment, organizational support, and employee engagement, which were derived from the initial codes reflecting both organizational practices and managerial experiences (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). A clear and rigorous framework was provided for the data analysis, ensuring that the interpretations were based on both participant experience and the experience of management.

Prior to each interview, participants were given a detailed information sheet about the purpose of the study and written informed consent was obtained before participation. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were assured of the confidentiality of their person and the organizations whose names were mentioned in the interview. Interviews were audio recorded with participants’ permission, transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy prior to use in analysis. Where interviews were conducted in Arabic, transcripts were translated into English meaningfully and contextually prior to coding. All interviews, transcripts and other materials directly related to this project were stored on password-protected files only accessible to the research team. In keeping with accepted ethical principles of qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2019), all identifying personal and organizational names were removed upon transcription to protect participants’ anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 1 presents the global, organizing, and basic themes derived from the thematic network analysis used to structure the findings.

Table 1. Global, organizing, and basic themes derived from thematic network analysis.

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Themes
Talent Management as a Strategic Organizational Mechanism	Talent Attraction and Recruitment	Employer branding; talent acquisition strategies; workforce planning; recruitment effectiveness
	Talent Development and Career Growth	Training opportunities; career advancement; mentoring; leadership development
	Talent Retention Strategies	Employee recognition; competitive rewards; retention initiatives; succession planning
Organizational Support and Employee-Centered HRM Practices	Supportive Leadership Practices	Leadership accessibility; managerial responsiveness; coaching and guidance; employee empowerment
	Communication and Transparency	Open communication; information sharing; feedback mechanisms; organizational transparency
	Employee Well-Being and Development	Work–life balance initiatives; employee assistance; learning opportunities; supportive workplace practices
Psychological Contract Fulfillment and Reciprocal Organizational Relationships	Perceived Organizational Commitment	Fulfillment of promises; organizational reliability; consistency of actions and policies
	Trust and Reciprocity	Mutual respect; organizational fairness; employee trust; reciprocal exchanges.
	Trust and Reciprocity	Procedural fairness; equitable treatment; appreciation and acknowledgment of contributions
Employee Engagement and Organizational Outcomes	Emotional and Cognitive Engagement	Organizational attachment; enthusiasm; commitment; sense of belonging
	Behavioral Engagement	Discretionary effort; proactive behavior; service quality; teamwork
	Retention and Organizational Resilience	Intention to stay; workforce stability; organizational loyalty; adaptability to challenges

3.3. Respondents' Profile

The sample consisted of 37 senior managers working within four- and five-star hotels across Lebanon, the UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Oman, including HR managers, HR directors, GMs and CEOs who were directly and competently involved in talent management, employee engagement initiatives, keeping, and supporting the workforce. The sample aimed to encompass a diversity in terms of manager type, country, hotel category, professional experience and educational background, permitting the detection of repeating themes across different hospitality contexts. Profiles of the respondents are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents' profile.

Respondent Code	Position	Country	Hotel Category	Education	Years of Experience
P01	HR Manager	Lebanon	5-Star	Master's	12
P02	General Manager	UAE	5-Star	Master's	18
P03	HR Director	Egypt	4-Star	Master's	15
P04	CEO	Jordan	5-Star	Master's	22
P05	HR Manager	Bahrain	5-Star	Bachelor's	10
P06	General Manager	Qatar	5-Star	Master's	17
P07	HR Director	Saudi Arabia	5-Star	Master's	19
P08	CEO	Turkey	5-Star	Doctorate	25

Table 2. Cont.

Respondent Code	Position	Country	Hotel Category	Education	Years of Experience
P09	HR Manager	Oman	4-Star	Bachelor's	11
P10	General Manager	Lebanon	5-Star	Master's	14
P11	HR Director	UAE	5-Star	Master's	16
P12	CEO	Egypt	5-Star	Doctorate	24
P13	HR Manager	Jordan	4-Star	Bachelor's	9
P14	General Manager	Bahrain	5-Star	Master's	20
P15	HR Director	Qatar	5-Star	Master's	18
P16	CEO	Saudi Arabia	5-Star	Doctorate	27
P17	HR Manager	Turkey	4-Star	Bachelor's	8
P18	General Manager	Oman	5-Star	Master's	15
P19	HR Director	Lebanon	5-Star	Master's	13
P20	CEO	UAE	5-Star	Doctorate	26
P21	HR Manager	Egypt	4-Star	Bachelor's	7
P22	General Manager	Jordan	5-Star	Master's	16
P23	HR Director	Bahrain	5-Star	Master's	14
P24	CEO	Qatar	5-Star	Doctorate	23
P25	HR Manager	Saudi Arabia	5-Star	Bachelor's	11
P26	General Manager	Turkey	5-Star	Master's	19
P27	HR Director	Oman	4-Star	Master's	12
P28	CEO	Lebanon	5-Star	Doctorate	28
P29	HR Manager	UAE	5-Star	Bachelor's	10
P30	General Manager	Egypt	4-Star	Master's	17
P31	HR Director	Jordan	5-Star	Master's	15
P32	CEO	Bahrain	5-Star	Doctorate	21
P33	HR Manager	Qatar	5-Star	Bachelor's	9
P34	General Manager	Saudi Arabia	5-Star	Master's	18
P35	HR Director	Turkey	5-Star	Master's	16
P36	CEO	Oman	5-Star	Doctorate	24
P37	General Manager	Lebanon	4-Star	Master's	13

Heterogeneous purposive sampling was further used to enhance thematic saturation while adding depth (by reaching saturation) to senior managers within different hotel types, organizational contexts (and national contexts, including roles and hotel types), and managerial roles (HR Managers, HR Directors, GMs, and CEOs) of four- and five-star hotels (in Lebanon, UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Oman). Heterogeneous purposive sampling gives the researcher the opportunity to capitalize on variation for their chosen research method. This enables them to research not just a few cases, to saturation, but many cases, each including some shared features, and some areas of difference (Patton, 2015). This prevents us reaching a singular conclusion derived from a single role, organization, or national context and increases the transferability of the analysis.

Thematic saturation was assessed as interviews were conducted in phases. A saturation point is reached when several interviews generate little in the way of new codes and peel away from confirming or clarify patterns of already-derived themes (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Saturation was indicated when the last block of interviews generated few new codes, and these codes centered on or confirmed themes on talent management, organizational support, psychological contract fulfillment, trust, reciprocity, employee engagement, and workforce retention. The cyclical saturation process is outlined in Table A1 (Appendix A).

To enhance methodological rigor, thematic analysis of interviews was conducted via NVivo. The first author re-read transcripts repeatedly and developed initial codes 'grounded' in reference to participants' data used, continuing to the point of theoretical saturation (suggesting a high-level of repeatability). These first-order codes helped definitions guide the establishment of organizing themes that synthesize first-order codes. A second

coder reviewed a 20% sample of first-order codes. The intercoder agreement was 0.92, indicating a high-level of consistency in coding, theme development and interpretation. Where there were differences in coding or theme interpretation draft codes and codes were used to reach agreement in an iterative process (Dodgson, 2019).

Credibility was further enhanced through the following additional steps pertinent to our sample of those in senior roles in different Middle Eastern countries. An audit trail was maintained to document key coding decisions and the development of themes including mental memos written during analysis (theme memos) and analytical memos recording decisions and reasoning throughout the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The co-researchers engaged in reflexive memo-writing and re-reading of transcripts when developing themes, and during theme incubation, as well as by looking for outliers, by examining divergent cases and felt it imperative that the informed and final themes should remain rooted in research participants as the study leads to decisions about how organizations will be constructed and managed (Patton, 2015, pp. 586–587). Participants could not be brought back to track member checking as they were senior managers across different types of hotels across Middle Eastern countries.

1. Cross-Country and Cross-Organizational Comparison

The sample characteristics offered us the opportunity to compare management perspectives from several countries in the Middle East, different types of hotels, and across different types of organizations. This includes four- and five-stars hotels that have HR managers, HR directors, general managers, and CEOs who can be used to compare leadership roles and organizational contexts. This comparison across 4- or 5-star hotels in several countries has provided the study with additional credibility, breadth, and transferability, reducing the likelihood that results are only reflective of a single country's norms or an individual organization's characteristics, thus increasing the theme analysis' credibility, breadth, and transferability.

2. Variation among respondents

There were large differences between the respondents with respect to their managerial position, educational background, professional experience, hotel category, and geographic area, therefore resulting in a deeper understanding of talent management practices, employer psychological contract fulfillment, organization support, and employee engagement. This varied nature of the respondents allowed for the study to capture various managerial interpretations related to employee development, organizational commitment, reciprocal relationships, and workforce retention; therefore, the variation in characteristics of the respondents provided additional depth of analysis of the findings by including multiple organizational and cultural perspectives.

3. Repeated themes as evidence of saturation

The rationale for achieving thematic saturation is based on both the variety of samples collected and the number of times conceptual or thematic patterns of information recurred in interviews. During the data collection process, the recurrence of similar themes during interviews was extensive and included employee attraction, employee development, organizational support, transparent communication, employer psychological contract fulfillment, trust, reciprocity, employee engagement, and employee retention among employees from different types hotels, managerial roles, and countries; thus, the reoccurrence of these themes throughout the study indicated that the coding scheme had stabilized and that data saturation occurred at approximately the same time that the thematic patterns demonstrated strong evidence that the theme saturation had been reached, and that participants' attributions and attributive structures (perspective) characteristically portrayed their experiences and connected with their managerial impressions and opinions.

4. Rigor of Thematic Coding and Manageability

The number of interviews (37) provided reasonable analytical richness and methodological feasibility. Sufficient diversity within the dataset provided opportunity to ensure appropriate variation in terms of country, type of organization, and managerial level, but is still manageable for analysis of rigor and validity within qualitative methods. Thus, multiple reviews; iterative coding; cross-examining between coders; refining thematic structure; and the consistent use of QSR NVivo software 14 were possible during all phases of conducting analysis. The strong intercoder agreement (0.92) provides additional support for the reliability of the coding framework and the consistency and trustworthiness of thematic exegesis (Dodgson, 2019; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Collectively, the diversity of samples, systematic process of coding, and evidence of thematic saturation contributed to addressing the methodological rigor of the overall study.

4. Analysis

4.1. Theme 1: Relational Trust and Psychological Contract Fulfillment

This theme encompasses managers' beliefs that delivering on employees' psychological expectations through organizational altitude, transparency and responsive communication fortifies employee engagement, organizational commitment, and workforce stability. Managerial accounts suggest that psychological contract fulfillment is an essential and major relational mechanism related to employee engagement and organizational commitment within the hotels of the Middle East. Participants consistently perceived that employees are becoming concerned with issues of job security, organizational fairness, transparent communication, and managerial responsiveness within the unpredictable environment of hospitality. Managers articulated that employees are increasingly evaluating organizations through relational and psychological measures and not solely based on financial compensation or transactional employment arrangements.

Participants frequently described transparent communication as a critical means through which organizations provide employees with an increase in trust and psychological security. Managers agreed that the use of transparent communication lessened the uncertainty for employees, positively influenced employees' perceptions of the sincerity of the organization, and strengthened reciprocal organizational commitment. As an HR manager who worked in the UAE, I found that one of the most frequently expressed desires of employees was reassurance about their future with an employer. Employees were concerned about more than just their working conditions; they were also looking for long-term commitments and support from employers. The HR manager indicated that an employee's desire for reassurance as to their future working for an employer speaks to how employees view their employer's level of care and concern for them, and to the organizational culture. . .an organization's perceived level of care and concern for its workforce has a strong influence on shaping employee attitude."

Psychological Contract Theory defines these perceptions as how employees perceive that their employer is providing them with the support, security, and commitment they expect from that organization. Therefore, employees who perceive that their employer demonstrates a level of concern for their future and well-being have greater levels of trust in their employer and more attachment to the organization.

According to a general manager at an organization in Lebanon, "most of the time when we engage employees, it's not just about performance-based metrics; we need to provide our employees with trust, emotional support, and psychological safety to be successful."

This statement indicates that there is a growing body of evidence supporting a more relationally based definition of engagement, which includes not only meeting performance targets and providing financial incentives, but also providing employees with a sense

of trust, emotional support, and psychological safety in the workplace. The statement also indicates that, as such, there is a greater need for employees to have a supportive organizational relationship where they can reduce uncertainties and increase their confidence in leaders of the organization. This finding supports Social Exchange Theory in that employees will exhibit positive behaviors towards their organizations when provided positive resources (such as supportive organizational behaviors); these resources result in more employee involvement and commitment to the organization. Trust and emotional support were described by participants as organizational resources that fostered positive responses from employees.

A human resource director from Jordan best illustrated this point with the following statement:

“Regular, honest communication was key. Employees appreciated when they received honest communication about the organization even during difficult operational times.”

The above statement indicates that communication transparency and honesty are important for maintaining reciprocal relationships with the organization. Another manager specifically addressed the issue of maintaining promises to both their employees and their customers during difficult times:

“We need to keep the remaining running businesses enthused through training, loyalty based on promises and incentives. Skilled people will not stay in a country that does not have a fair idea of tomorrow”. (Manager, Hilton, Lebanon). Participants do not necessarily expect their organization to eliminate all challenges in the work environment, but instead expect timely communication about what is happening within the organization and honesty and openness about the challenges facing the organization. Providing employees with transparent communication reduces employee uncertainty, while simultaneously enhancing employee perceptions of fairness and managerial credibility.

In terms of the psychological contract, communication transparency is one form through which the organization demonstrates its sincerity and meets employees’ psychological contract expectations for honesty and respectful treatment. Researchers indicated that as long as communication was considered consistent and transparent, employees were less likely to lose trust in organizational leaders, even in the face of operational challenges.

Participants also emphasized that employees perceived managerial responsiveness, emotional support, and quality communications as contributing support to reciprocal organizational commitment. Managers indicated that employees who perceived a high level of organizational support exhibited a higher degree of engagement and loyalty to the organization, and were much more likely to remain with an organization, even in times of high operational demand. These managerial accounts suggest that employees may establish relational trust through continued organizational processes that support perceptions of support, fairness, and mutual commitment to one another, rather than isolated positive manager actions. The findings provide evidence for the important role of psychological contract fulfillment as a bridge between organizational support and employee engagement/workforce stability. Communication transparency, emotional support and managerial responsiveness were all identified as key organizational practices that helped build trust and to create reciprocal organizational relationships. In uncertainty-sensitive hospitality settings, employees seemed to primarily evaluate organizations based on their perceptions of relational commitment, indicating that psychological contract fulfillment is central to sustaining engagement, organizational attachment and long-term workforce retention. Although all participants referred to this theme, HR directors concentrated on HRM practices while general managers and CEOs drew attention to leadership and culture.

4.2. Theme 2. Talent Management Is Part of Organizational Commitment

This theme captures managers' beliefs that talent management goes beyond HR and acts as a relational mechanism proving organizational commitment through employee development, mentoring and recognition, and long-term investment. The participants emphasized the importance of talent management practices as strategic in terms of sustaining a stable workforce, maintaining employee engagement levels, and enhancing organizational resilience in Middle Eastern hotel environments. All managers described talent management as moving beyond traditional recruitment and selection activities to include practices such as employee development, mentoring, leadership support and recognition, and long-term retention strategy. As one participant explained:

"We need to lead the group with humanity. We need to make them feel like their presence matters. They are not just numbers." (Manager, Four Seasons, Lebanon). As a result, participants indicated that employees were increasingly viewing these practices as evidence of the organization's commitment to them and the investment in their professional development.

Several participants noted that investments in training, mentoring, leadership development and employee recognition positively affected employees' perceptions of organizational support/commitment. Many of these practices were viewed as signals that the organization valued its employees beyond their direct contributions to the operational level.

A manager in Qatar commented, "The hospitality environment has changed a lot; while technical competencies are still important, so too are adaptability/resilience and emotional intelligence." This comment indicates that managers are increasingly recognizing that there is a need for them to invest in their employees' broader capabilities beyond those that are purely technical in nature. According to study participants, hospitality environments today require personal and interpersonal skills that promote adaptability and resilience in their staff. Such investments represent a long-term commitment by the organization to develop its workforce rather than a more short-term emphasis on immediate results.

From a talent management standpoint, these practices exemplify a development-based approach to building employee capability and long-term employability. The results of this study suggest that organizations can demonstrate their commitment to employees through ongoing investment in both their professional and personal development.

As one HR manager from Bahrain stated, "Employees pay attention to whether organizations invest in their professional development because that makes them feel more committed and loyal to the organization."

This highlights the importance of development opportunities in establishing relationships between the organization and the employees. Participants consistently indicated that employees perceived training programs, career advancement opportunities, and mentoring programs as signs that the organization was committed to their long-term success. Hence, development opportunities can serve both as tools for improving employee productivity, as well as indicators of the organization's commitment to establishing trust and attachment with employees.

These findings are closely aligned with the theory of the psychological contract, which asserts that employees will assess their employer's fulfillment of their perceived implicit obligations with respect to career development and growth. When employees believe the organization is actively supporting their development, they are more likely to interpret their employment relationship as fair, supportive, and mutually beneficial.

Similarly, a CEO of a Saudi Arabian company noted, "Retention is largely dependent upon how employees perceive that the company supports them. Recognition and avail-

ability of opportunities for career development are extremely important to maintaining talented employees.”

This further illustrates the link between talent management and employee retention. According to the participants, talented workers conduct an increasing amount of organizational evaluation based on recognition, advancement opportunities, and professional growth. Specifically, recognition practices are very important because they provide an understanding of value and enhance the employee’s belief that their contributions are valued by the organization.

From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, recognition and career development serve as organizational investments that instigate employee reciprocity. Participants of the study indicated multiple times that employees who view their organization as being invested in their career have higher loyalty; more engagement; and a higher willingness to stay with the organization despite difficult operational environments.

In addition, talent management practices were viewed not only as technical HRM processes but increasingly as relationship-based organizational mechanisms. In particular, managers reported that mentoring, accessible leadership, coaching, and developing opportunities reinforced perceptions of the organization’s sincerity, fairness, and long-term commitment to employees. These types of practices enhanced organizational trust and reinforced the perception of the organization’s commitment to maintain mutually beneficial relationships.

Overall, participants perceived talent management practices as contributing to workforce development and operational effectiveness as well as fulfilling the psychological contract, creating relational trust, and supporting organizational resilience. Study participants consistently identified development opportunities, recognition initiatives, mentoring opportunities, and the support of leadership as demonstrating commitment to the employee and consequently supporting perceived employee engagement and retention. As a result, talent management emerged as a relational organizational mechanism through which organizations in Middle Eastern hospitality were able to build trust, support reciprocal relationships, and enhance long-term sustainability of the workforce. Although all participants referred to this theme, HR directors concentrated on HRM practices while general managers and CEOs drew attention to leadership and culture.

4.3. Theme 3. Employee Retention and Organizational Reciprocity

This theme reflects managers’ beliefs that supportive organizational practices actively encourage mutual trust, psychological safety, and organizational commitment. Support provided by the organization is one of the greatest contributors to employee retention and stability of the workforce in Middle Eastern hotels.

The participants noted that employees have an increased expectation that organizations would provide empathy, flexibility, fairness, and responsiveness to their needs, especially in environments with high operational demands and sensitivity to uncertainty—typically found in the hospitality industry. Managers stated that employees are increasingly assessing the organization’s commitment based on their day-to-day experiences with support and interpersonal treatment rather than just financial compensation or formal employment terms.

The participants perceived those supportive organizational practices improved employees’ perceptions of the level of organizational care toward them, which had a direct positive impact on the retention of the workforce. Some managers reported developing employee-centered HRM initiatives, such as mentoring systems, employee participation mechanisms, recognition programs, professional development opportunities, and supportive communication practices to reinforce employee trust and attachment to the organization.

One manager from Jordan indicated that, “We heavily focused on communicating with and providing emotional support to employees, to help them to feel valued and protected.”

This quote reflects how the provision of emotional and relational support plays an important role in how employees develop their perceptions of the organization. The participant indicated that employees were looking for confirmation that they were valued and recognized within the organization, which shows that the provision of communication and emotional support are important mechanisms for building, or strengthening, trust in the organization by employees. The participants indicated that the provision of support should not be considered a discrete managerial activity, but rather a continuous activity where employees develop confidence in the organization’s intentions.

From the perspective of Psychological Contract Theory, these types of practices contribute to the fulfillment of employees’ expectations of receiving organizational care, support, and fair treatment. Perceptions that an organization fulfilled their obligations seem to be positively associated with employees’ attitudes towards the organization as well as their commitment to the organization. Here is an example of a Turkish participant’s statement: “Retention of talented employees will take more than a salary. There is also the need for the employee to have: Trust, confidence in, and reassurance from the organization.” This comment conveys that employee retention depends upon more than financial incentives; it reinforces the importance of developing positive organizational relationships based on trust. Many participants noted that employees increasingly value trusting relationships with their organizations based on support, transparency and response from management regarding any issues employees may encounter. The comment further suggests that employees interpret the actions of their organizations to determine if there is a genuine long-term commitment to an employment relationship by the organization. This finding reinforces Social Exchange Theory in that organizational support leads to reciprocal employee behavior. Participants reported that employees who experience reassurance and trust from their organizational leadership return that support through loyalty, engagement, and continued commitment to the organization despite the many challenges of working for organizations. Similarly, an HR manager in Oman said, “Employees stay with organizations that are fair and truly care about them.” This statement illustrates the importance of fairness and organizational concern in the decision to stay with an organization. Participants repeatedly referred to employee well-being (i.e., mental/emotional well-being) as the primary indicator used by employees to assess the sincerity and commitment of an organization. Fair treatment and concern for the well-being of employees appeared to strengthen the employees’ emotional attachment to the organization and reinforce their confidence in the organization. When viewed through the psychological contract lens, initiatives related to fairness and employee well-being are key obligations of the organization that impact employee perceptions of contract fulfillment. Participants cited that employees are less likely to seek alternative employment options when they believe an organization is genuinely concerned for its employees and more likely to maintain their commitment to the goals of the organization. Several participants stated that employee retention is increasingly dependent upon relational trust (e.g., trust built on relationships) and the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the employee and employer than on a purely transactional basis (i.e., payment). Managers consistently commented that employees who see the organization as being committed to them have higher levels of engagement and emotional attachment, and greater willingness to stay with the organization regardless of the challenges that arise from the work they perform. Collectively, the findings suggest that retention is not just an economic decision (i.e., money), but rather a relational outcome created by employees’ perceptions of support, fairness and reciprocity received from the organization. Managerial accounts indicate that reciprocity through an organization is a valuable means

of linking organizational support to employee retention. Additionally, employee-centered HRM practices, supportive leadership behaviors, open communication, and concern for the well-being of employees were perceived as influencing the fulfillment of the psychological contract and the development of relational trust. In the hotel environments in the Middle East, it appears that employees are more likely to be committed to organizations where they consistently receive support, fairness and true concern for their long-term well-being, thus helping to strengthen workforce stability and resiliency in organizations. Although all participants referred to this theme, HR directors concentrated on HRM practices while general managers and CEOs drew attention to leadership and culture.

4.4. Theme 4. Leadership Trust and Psychological Safety

This theme reflects managers' beliefs that employee-focused HRM practices promote employee engagement through creating supportive, developmental, and psychologically safe working environments. The level of support provided from leadership has emerged as another major factor that influences the fulfillment of psychological contracts and employee engagement in the Middle Eastern hotel industry. Participants frequently reported that managers play an important role in reducing employee uncertainty, providing workforce morale, and supplying emotional support to employees to help them cope with difficult working conditions. Leadership behavior is often viewed by employees as a strong indicator of trust, commitment, and reliability that can be used by employees to evaluate organizational trustworthiness. Managers reported meeting regularly with employees to discuss organizational developments, operational issues faced by employees, and any employee concerns. Managers reported that clear, open communication and accessible leadership increased organizational trust, thereby giving employees an increased sense of psychological security.

"Employees expect that when they have difficulty in their work environment, that their leader will be present, accessible, and supportive. Leadership presence is critical during these periods," said a general manager from Egypt.

This quotation demonstrates the symbolic importance of leadership presence during periods of ambiguity. Participants noted that employees saw leadership presence as an indication that organizational leaders were willing to be available to support employees and to be close to them during difficult times. Therefore, it appears that by being accessible to employees, leaders increased employees' confidence in organizational leadership and provided employees with greater clarity about the direction of the organizational leaders.

Another manager described leadership as follows:

"The leader is with the team on the floor; they set clear directions, trust and empower team members, and create an environment of inclusion and belonging."
(Manager, InterContinental, Bahrain)

From a Psychological Contract Theory standpoint, engaged, visible, and supportive leadership behavior helped to strengthen employees' perception that organizations have met their implicit obligations of support, guidance, and commitment from managers. Participants reported that when leaders are actively engaged with employees regarding their needs and concerned about their contribution to the success of the organization, employees are more likely to maintain their level of trust in the organization. The following is a paraphrase of the text above:

A Lebanese participant remarked:

"Honest communication and empathy shown by leaders had a positive effect on how staff responded".

This statement points to the connection between trustworthy leaders and trustworthy employees, as well as how both are positively related through honest communication. Participants frequently reiterated that employees appreciate honest communication even when their organization is facing operational difficulties, and rather than looking for a leader to fix all of the challenges, staff seem to appreciate that leaders are openly communicating, sincerely showing concern for their health and well-being, and are being forthcoming about the challenges faced by the organization, and expectations of their employees.

This finding relates to Social Exchange Theory, in which employees will reciprocate the supportive and respectful behaviors of a leader with greater levels of commitment, engagement and organizational attachment (Germain et al., 2020). Furthermore, it appears that empathetic communication reinforces employees' beliefs that a workplace is fair and allows for reciprocal working relationships between the employee and the organization.

Another UAE manager stated:

"Psychological safety was essential. Employees needed to be able to talk about their concerns and operational difficulties without being uncomfortable".

This statement indicates that there was a great relationship between the leadership and the development of a psychologically safe workplace. Participants described psychologically safe workplaces as those in which employees were free to express concerns, to talk about the challenges of the workplace and to seek support from the leader without fear of being negatively impacted. Therefore, the behavior of the individual leaders influenced not only how well people communicated but also their willingness to use the organization to help themselves.

From the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, supportive leadership behaviors were viewed as an important resource to employees to help reduce workplace strain and increased engagement when employees were presented with challenging working conditions. Leadership accessibility, communication transparency and emotional support provided employees with the resources to cope with the demands of the job which allowed employees to maintain their level of engagement in the organization despite working in a challenging work environment. In alignment with COR theory, all participants reported that supportive leadership encourages employees to safeguard their emotional and mental resources. When leaders demonstrate concern, empathy, and a willingness to respond in positive ways, employees report greater confidence, reassurance, and resilience. By reducing the sense of uncertainty and allowing employees to experience positive emotional states during challenging times, these leadership actions support employees' psychological well-being.

The emphasis on the impact of leadership on employee trust, organizational commitment, and sense of psychological safety was frequently mentioned. Managers noted that employees who found their leaders to be approachable, supportive, and trustworthy showed higher than average levels of organizational commitment, engagement, and confidence in the organization's ability to provide long-term stability. Leadership support is therefore viewed as extending beyond traditional manager duties and serving as the primary way employees evaluated the organization's trustworthiness.

The managerial accounts suggest that leadership support serves as an essential resource for employees in the context of fulfilling their psychological contracts; developing relational trust; and supporting employee engagement. Leadership visibility, transparent communication, empathy, and approachability all enhance employees' sense of psychological safety by lessening the level of perceived organizational uncertainty. The analysis provided evidence that in the context of the Middle Eastern hospitality industry, supportive leadership serves as the primary means through which organizations may support perceived employee resilience, engagement, and enhance long-term organizational commit-

ment. Although all participants referred to this theme, HR directors concentrated on HRM practices while general managers and CEOs drew attention to leadership and culture.

4.5. Theme 5: Organizational Culture and Relational Exchange

In addition to the impact of leadership on employee engagement and organizational commitment, the research showed that employee engagement and organizational commitment were strongly affected by organizational culture in Middle Eastern hotel companies. Participants indicated repeatedly that supportive organizational cultures characterized by teamwork, collaboration, open communication, and opportunities for employee voice/follow-up were critical factors in creating morale, trust, and long-term commitment among employees. Managers agreed that employees are increasingly seeking employment in organizations that provide a culture in which they feel valued, included, and psychologically supported at work. Respondents often reported that organizational culture is a pivotal influence on how staff interpret the intentions of their companies and the type of relationship they find with the organization. Positive cultural climates appeared to enhance feelings of fairness, belonging, and mutual commitment, thereby enhancing employee engagement and sticking with the organization.

One manager in Bahrain commented, “Our organizational culture ended up being our greatest asset. Employees were supportive of one another and felt that they connected to the organization.” This remark illustrates how interpersonal connections and social integration play a significant role in hospitality organizations. The interviewee remarked that employees experienced a connection to the organization and an attachment to it through relationships built on the foundation of helping and working together. These actions appeared to develop an emotional association with the organization as well as reinforcing the notion that the organization truly appreciates its employees.

From the perspective of Psychological Contract Theory, a supportive organizational culture enables the fulfillment of employees’ expectations for respect, inclusion, and organizational support. Respondents indicated that employees are more likely to trust organizations when their organizational values of collaboration and mutual assistance are constantly manifested in their daily interactions at work.

In a similar light, another respondent from Saudi Arabia stated, “Employees are much more engaged when they are included in discussions about the organization and the decision-making processes of the organization.” This statement emphasizes the importance of employees taking part and having a voice in organizational life. Respondents consistently stated that employees desire to have opportunities to provide input, make suggestions, and actively engage in discussions that influence the work environment. Inclusion in decision-making enhances the employees’ perception of importance and reaffirms their perceptions. According to the participants, there is good fit between the findings of this research study and the Social Exchange Theory as it relates to organizations creating opportunities for their employees to participate in processes at the organization and have input back to the organization, as well as employees reciprocating in these processes. Participants added that when employees believe they are included in the processes of the organization, they are much more likely to be highly engaged with their work, willing to support their organization beyond the boundaries of what is required in their formal job role, and committed to their organization.

In addition, one of the HR managers from Turkey provided the following statement:

Collegiate solutions to collective problems in the organization created greater trust and lowered employees’ feelings of uncertainty.

This response also demonstrates the importance of collaboration and its impact on trust and psychological safety. Participants articulated that the workplace is a collaborative

work environment where employees feel safe in obtaining assistance, sharing knowledge and working as a team in attempting to solve issues and that this type of workplace is even more significant given the operational complexity and constant uncertainty present in the hospitality industry.

Collaboration from a relational HRM perspective is a tool for organizations to foster trust, build mutual respect and develop positive relational interactions within the organization. Participants also noted that collaborative workplace cultures delivered a reduction in feelings of isolation, created a level of certainty within the workplace, and increased confidence in individuals within the organization (both co-workers and organizational leaders).

Additionally, participants noted that organizational cultures promoting, as an example, transparency in communication, collaboration, inclusivity and mutual respect positively influenced an employee's perception of the fulfillment of their psychological contract with the organization and ultimately their connection to the organization. Therefore, as an offshoot of this employee connection to the organization, the employee is also connected to the organization in a reciprocal manner; the connection reinforces the organization's ability to achieve its objectives with the continued commitment of its employees.

In conclusion, the managerial accounts indicate that organizational culture may serve as a critical relational environment through which trust, inclusion and reciprocal relational exchanges between employees and the organization are consistently fostered. When employees participate, collaborate, and communicate transparently, these activities will signal to employees that the organization values their contributions and respects their perspectives. Therefore, organizational culture serves as a vital link between psychological contract fulfillment, workforce stability and long-term commitment to the organization while providing support from the organization for the psychological contract within the hospitality industry in the Middle East.

5. Discussion

The research examined the relationship of talent management strategies and fulfillment of the psychological contract to employee engagement among employees of hotel organizations in the Middle East. The results suggest that managers perceived that engagement is developed through the establishment of reciprocal relationships with the organization, rather than simply being reliant upon transactions or transactional contracts and performance-based human resource management (HRM) programs. Development of this reciprocal relationship occurs through trust and support from the organization, transparent communication, responsiveness from leadership and developing employees through organizational investment (including talent management initiatives). The findings suggest that managers perceived the development of relational mechanisms by which hospitality organizations support employee commitment to their organization, as well as attachment to and retention of the employee.

5.1. *Psychological Contract Fulfillment: A Relational Mechanism for Employee Engagement*

One of the key managerial perceptions of this research is that the psychological contract serves as a relational mechanism that links organizational practices with employees being engaged with, retained by and committed to the organization. Managers perceived that employees evaluated their organization based upon fairness; transparent communication; leadership responsiveness; support from the organization; and training/development opportunities, as opposed to simply relying upon formalized employment contracts. The participants cited the quality of communication and leadership availability/accessibility, and the organization's sincerity as being the most common practice(s) impacting the

employees' willingness to remain engaged in and committed to the organizational goals of that organization.

Additionally, employee engagement within the hospitality industry cannot be entirely explained using motivational or performance-based theories of motivation or performance. There is an overall sense of organization (i.e., the collective) with which employees perceive their organization (i.e., the organization)—as having been engaged at the employee-relational level of the organization. This continued assessment by employees concerning the extent to which organizations live up to their implicit obligations to them (e.g., support, communication, recognition and professional development) leads to the development of organizational trust, psychological safety and workforce commitment—an ongoing, relational, psychological contract fulfillment process.

These findings build and advance upon earlier studies that have established a link between psychological contract fulfillment and employee engagement and commitment, and provide greater insight into the many ways in which employees construct their sense of fulfillment through their day-to-day interactions with their organizations and through their day-to-day experiences with organizational leaders. When they rate an organization's level of support, because they feel their leaders were responsive, or are able to communicate adequately and receive professional development, they interpret those dimensions of their employment relationship as a signal that the organization's implicit obligations are being upheld to them. Moreover, these findings are in agreement with the findings of several Middle Eastern hotel organizations which indicate that psychological contract fulfillment fosters commitment to, and reduces intention to leave the organization due to the presence of supportive leadership and a positive organizational climate (F. Hassanein & Daouk, 2026).

This study demonstrates that psychological contract fulfillment represents a process of dynamic relational interaction in which employees evaluate organizational sincerity, support and reciprocity on an ongoing basis, and it continues to build upon the Psychological Contract Theory by illustrating that psychological contract fulfillment is an ongoing relational dynamic (not solely a *precedent* to employee attitudes) for sustaining employee engagement and long-term organizational attachment in the hospitality industry, particularly in environments that are characterized as uncertainty-averse.

5.2. Talent Management as a Relational Organizational Mechanism

In conclusion, the findings of this research also extend the HRM literature pertaining to the hospitality industry by providing further evidence that talent management practices serve not only as technical organizational HRM strategies, but also as relational organizational mechanisms by enhancing psychological contract fulfillment and employee trust in their employer. Most of the previous research on talent management has primarily focused on optimizing the workforce and developing succession plans whilst improving the competitive position or performance results of the organization (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020), yet the participants in this study all agreed that talent management practices are more than just planning for succession and performance outcomes; they serve as a means to communicate commitment to and support for long-term investments in employees.

As a result, employees increasingly see, interpret or evaluate mentorships, transparent communication, access to leaders, recognition programs, and development opportunities as indicators of an organization's commitment to them and their future. Therefore, development opportunities were viewed not simply as ways to build skills for an employee, but as evidence an organization valued the employee's future development and long-term contribution. Likewise, enhancement of mentorships, leadership support, and opportunities

for career advancement will enhance employees' perception that their organization will continue a mutually beneficial employment relationship.

In summary, these results indicate that talent management was perceived to support employee engagement both through the provision of workforce development opportunities, as well as facilitating relational and psychological exchanges between an employee and their organization. Consequently, talent management practices serve the dual purpose of being both a developmental intervention and a symbolic indication of the organization, thereby creating trust and reciprocity between the employees and organization and enhancing the employees' bond to the organization.

As a result of this study, the author extended current relational HRM perspectives as a relational organizational mechanism(s), rather than simply a technical function of HRM. The findings from this study contribute to the current understanding on talent management by indicating that talent management may support employee engagement through meeting psychological contracts, building trust within the organization, and creating reciprocal organizational relationships, thereby expanding the current focus of the talent management literature beyond traditional performance-oriented approaches.

5.3. Employee Engagement as a Relational and Resource-Based Outcome

Social Exchange Theory is further supported by the study's findings indicating that employee reciprocation toward supportive organizational practices is reflected in their organizational commitment, employee engagement, and loyalty to the organization (Saks, 2022). According to the findings of the study, managers perceived that employees who received high levels of organizational support, leadership responsiveness, communication transparency, and developmental investment were more likely than other employees to remain in their organizations under challenging operational conditions. This indicates that the quality of the reciprocal relationship between the organization and the employee significantly impacts the employee's attitude towards remaining with and the behavior of such employee within a hospitality environment.

The study findings are consistent with the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model because they indicate that the availability of organizational resources is critical to supporting the well-being and engagement of employees in demanding hospitality environments. Many employees in the hospitality industry work in a highly emotion-dependent environment with significant operational pressures, fluctuating workloads, and uncertain workforce conditions. During times of extreme uncertainty, the HRM resources available to employees such as supportive leaders, transparent communication, a psychologically safe environment, mentoring opportunities, and having a voice in their employment and HRM practices are key ways to reduce employees' experience of uncertainty and to develop the resiliency of the workforce.

The study findings also support the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory because there is evidence from the study of the concern by employees about maintaining their emotional, psychological, and professional resources. Managers reported that employees increasingly expect their organizations to provide reassurance, support, fairness, and organizational stability in the workplace to reduce their experience of emotional exhaustion and foster their psychological well-being. Therefore, supportive organizational environments are critical to helping employees maintain their resources and to have at least a positive experience from their employment.

Overall, these findings indicate that employee engagement is not just the outcome of motivation. Rather; employee engagement can be conceptualized as an organizational outcome that emerges from the results of reciprocal social exchanges between an organization and its employees and access to supportive organization resources.

The contribution of this study to the employee engagement literature is its integration of the Psychological Contract Theory (PCT) with Social Exchange Theory (SET), the JD-R model, and the COR theory to provide a single framework to explain the employee engagement phenomenon. The findings support the need for sustainable HRM practices because the workforce is sustained by using relational and psychological mechanisms. For example, numerous participants indicated that their organizations' supporting leadership developed their employees' sustainable workforce through cultural characteristics such as employee voice, trust, psychological safety, respect for inclusion, and collaborative environments through which employees can successfully fulfill their psychological contracts. In addition, the data from participants support an organizational culture which strengthens mutual trust and builds on organizational behavior as the basis for fulfilling their psychological contracts between the organization and its employees.

Furthermore, the findings align with existing sustainable HRM principles, which support long-term employee well-being, workforce resilience, and organizational sustainability rather than short-term performance measures. The study found important ways that organizations supported employee engagement and workforce stability by providing communication, transparent leadership, opportunities for development, recognition of achievement, psychological security, and a collaborative culture.

Further support that an organization's ability to balance employee well-being and relational organizational support with performance objectives significantly contributes to workforce sustainability is provided by the consistency of observations from employees who report that they are regularly supported within their organizations and experience positive workplace cultures. Thus, employees who have a sustained perception of their organizations as providing support and maintaining a positive workplace culture will generally remain engaged, committed, and loyal to their organizations in the face of adverse operational conditions and may become future leaders within their organizations.

The findings from this research can be used to support the study of sustainable HRM by demonstrating that sustainable workforce outcomes can be achieved through both relational and psychological mechanisms. The research indicates that the combination of HR practices, organizational culture, and psychological contract compliance functions to support employee well-being, resilience, and organization sustainability.

In addition, the present research has established a contribution to the hospitality management literature through qualitative evidence from Middle Eastern hotel organizations, an underrepresented area of employee engagement, talent management and psychological contract research. In contrast, most hospitality studies have taken a quantitative methodology in Western organizations, thereby limiting the understanding of how managers implement employee-centered HRM practices in the uncertain hospitality industry.

The study found that in Middle Eastern hotels characterized by labor market volatility, labor mobility, fluctuations in tourism, economic uncertainty, and operational stressors, employees look to relational organizational signals when assessing their organizational commitment and employment stability.

The need for supportive organizational relationships is further elevated by the difficulty employees experience in preparing for an uncertain future with respect to their careers and the future of the organizations they work for. Employees are, therefore, more sensitive to relational organizational signals for communicating trust, fairness, support and long-term commitment under these circumstances.

The contribution to the Middle Eastern hospitality literature provides evidence that employee engagement is intrinsically relational, and therefore, dependent on the organization's ability to build trust, comply with psychological contracts, foster mutual organizational exchanges and provide supportive work environments.

Together, the results demonstrate that employee engagement within the hospitality sector should be viewed as a relational outcome of psychological contract compliance, mutual organizational exchanges, leader trust, organizational culture, psychological safety, and employee-centric HRM practices. Thus, the research contributes to the hospitality HRM literature via the repositioning of talent management and employee engagement into a broader relational, psychological and sustainable organizational context.

6. Conclusions

This qualitative study explored team dynamics, talent management strategies and psychological contract fulfillment to enhance employee engagement in the Middle Eastern hotel industry. It suggests, from managerial perspectives, how employee engagement in hospitality settings increasingly relies on mutuality, which is defined by having good communication (transparency), responsive leaders (leadership), positive organizational support (support), trusting relationships (relational trust) and a sense of psychological safety (psychological safety).

The research also indicates that talent management practices should not only be seen as technical human resource management processes with a focus on workforce efficiency/performance. Instead, talent management has become a relational organizational mechanism through which organizations create a supportive environment for psychological contract fulfillment, develop trust and create commitment from staff. Managers perceived that employees in supportive organizational relationships tend to have higher levels of employee engagement, organizational connection, and workforce loyalty regardless of challenging operational conditions.

Using Psychological Contract Theory, Social Exchange Theory, the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, the study presents an integrated view of the relationship between supportive organizational environments, employee well-being, workforce retention and organizational resilience in hospitality environments that are subject to uncertainty.

The research also adds to the published literature in hospitality human resource management by suggesting, from managerial accounts, that sustainable employee engagement in today's hotel organizations is fundamentally a relational process. Employee engagement cannot solely be sustained through transactional employment relationships or performance-oriented HRM systems; rather, employee engagement exists and is maintained through an organization's ability to create and promote psychological safety, organizational sincerity, reciprocal trust and supportive cultures.

The research findings suggest that hospitality organizations interested in long-term workforce sustainability must move beyond technical HRM approaches to develop employee-centered organizational systems that can reinforce relational commitment, build workforce resilience and create sustainable organizational engagement in increasingly complex hospitality environments.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature in hospitality HRM, psychological contract fulfillment, employee engagement and sustainable HRM in a number of important ways.

First, this study adds to the literature in hospitality HRM by treating talent management as a relational organizational mechanism (vs. being primarily a technical HRM process focused solely on the efficiency and performance outcomes of human resources). Most of the existing studies in hospitality have focused primarily on recruitment, retention, and employee performance measures of talent management, whereas limited attention has been paid to the relational aspects of talent management relative to the fulfillment of

psychological contracts, employee trust, and organizational reciprocal exchanges. This research fills the gap, highlighting managers' perceptions of how talent management practices stimulate organizational attachment, relational trust and staff retention in stressful hospitality environments.

Second, this study contributes to Psychological Contract Theory by extending our understanding of psychological contract fulfillment within Middle Eastern hotel organizations which are characterized by unpredictable service and a high degree of instability in their labor force. The results indicate managers perceived employees as increasingly evaluating their commitment to the organization through: the extent to which there is clear communication between the organization and the employee, the degree of response by leadership to issues raised by employees, the amount of emotional support provided by the organization, and the extent to which there is visible sincerity from the organization. Therefore, psychological contract fulfillment occurs as a dynamic relational process created by ongoing interactions between the organization and the employee (rather than simply determined by the terms of the contract).

Third, this study contributes to the literature by arguing that staff engagement in hospitality is best seen as a relational outcome, not only based on earlier studies of employee engagement that tended to focus on members' motives and behaviors towards one another, but also the findings of this study demonstrating the role that psychological safety, trust in the organization, accessibility of leadership, and supportive cultures play in sustaining the engagement of employees over time.

Furthermore, by integrating PCT, SET, the JD-R Model, and COR Theory, the authors provide a much richer theoretical framework for understanding employee engagement and work retention, particularly in environments such as hospitality, that are particularly sensitive to uncertainty. Additionally, the way in which relational trust, the organizational resources provided to individuals, and indices of supportive HRM practices, are perceived to collectively support individual well-being, the organization's resilience to unpredictable environmental conditions, and the overall sustainability of the organization's workforce during challenging times, is evidenced by the findings of the study.

Finally, this study is likely to add to the body of qualitative research in the hospitality industry by providing managers with useful insights from 37 Middle Eastern hotels (a geographical region that has been largely ignored in the HRM literature). Through a qualitative examination of the relationship between HRM practices, relational HRM practices, and psychological contract fulfillment as reported by managers in Middle Eastern hotels, the study will clarify the mechanisms of organizational support and reciprocal organizational relationships within hospitality organizations.

Most importantly, the findings suggest that employee engagement in hospitality may be understood as a relationally sustained organizational phenomenon rather than solely an outcome of individual motivation. When examining the ways in which psychological contract fulfillment, support from the organization, responsiveness from leaders, and employee-centered HRM practices create reciprocity in employees' commitment to organizations, the study provides qualitative insights into how sustainable worker engagement is achieved in demanding business environments such as hospitality.

6.2. Practical Implications

The research findings suggest a number of action items for hospitality managers and HRM professionals seeking to enhance employee engagement, workforce stability, and organizational resiliency within demanding hospitality environments.

Hospitality organizations should place a priority on providing clearly defined organizational communication and ensuring access to leadership during periods of operational uncertainty. Through receiving clearly defined organizational communication and ongoing support from supervisors, employees will be more likely to develop organizational trust, psychological safety, and long-term organizational commitment.

Hospitality managers should implement employee-centered HRM practices that are capable of enhancing both the psychological contracting outcomes and reciprocal organizational relationships between employees and their respective employers. Examples of employee-centered HRM practices include mentoring programs, leadership development programs, employee recognition programs, professional development opportunities, psychological wellness resources, and participative decision-making processes.

The researchers say organizations that promote collaboration, inclusiveness, shared decision-making, and employee voice are better positioned to enhance relational trust, employee engagement and retention.

Leadership development programs within hospitality organizations should focus on developing relational leadership competencies, such as emotional intelligence, effective communication, psychological safety, empathy, and supportive behaviors. During demanding operational situations, employees are likely to evaluate their overall level of commitment to an organization based on the accessibility of their leaders, the amount of support they receive from their managers, and their overall sense of security.

In addition, hospitality organizations should understand that talent management practices include activities beyond their technical HRM functions. Furthermore, talent management is becoming more of a relational mechanism that affects both employee trust and psychological contracting outcomes, as well as the level of commitment employees feel toward their organizations. As a result, hospitality organizations cultivating positive employee relationships could enhance employee engagement, organizational resilience and service quality over time.

Psychological safety and relational trust must also be incorporated into formal HRM systems rather than being treated as informal managerial practices. Therefore, leadership training programs should focus on the development of emotional intelligence, communication transparency, supportive supervision, and management of employee well-being. In addition, HRM systems will promote psychological safety and relational trust by incorporating formalized mentoring programs, employee voice mechanisms, recognition programs, and developmental support practices that will reinforce employees' perceptions of their organization's sincerity and commitment.

7. Limitations

Some limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the data were collected only from managers, HR directors, general managers and CEOs. So, the findings indicate how they interpret employees' engagement and respond and fulfill employees' psychological contract, or the managers' understanding in relation to employees. Future studies may provide employees' perspectives or compare managers' perspectives, or both, alongside the perceptions of employees.

Second, the study was conducted qualitatively, by collected cross-sectional data; while it provides deep insight into how relation-based practices are understood by managers, it does not show how "psychological contracts are negotiated and changed" or how contracts result in engagement. Future studies might use longitudinal qualitative studies, or mixed methods, or use a sequential survey-interview to look at how employee perceptions change during different organizational change processes, or through a period of uncertainty.

Third, although participants from nine Middle Eastern countries are represented, the sample was purposive, consisting mainly of senior professionals working in four- and five-star hotels, and, indeed, the findings might not be statistically generalized to all hospitality organizations if bedrock assumptions of statistical generalizability need to be removed; but to allow judicious relational insight, drawing comparisons between hotel category and ownership, and country, would provide further insights from diverse institutional and cultural environments. Fourth, as interview data were relied upon, these are subject to retrospective hermeneutical reading and impulse to meet socially desirable ends, particularly in the case of managers. Future studies might exploit triangulation better through examining employee surveys, HR documents, turnover and engagement data, or observational evidence from the field. Lastly, some interviews needed to be translated into English, which meant some nuances of language may have been lost. Also, member checking was not possible, since all participants were very senior managers, spread across a constellation of countries. A helpful extension for future studies would be to deploy bilinguals for coding, participant validation for accuracy of text interpretation, and country specific case studies related to specific issues faced. Together, the study provides some useful qualitative evidence on how hotel managers in Middle Eastern contexts understand and talk about talent management, psychological contract fulfillment, and perceptions of organizational support as relational mechanisms enabling employee engagement and retention of workforce.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

- PCT Psychological Contract Theory
- HR Human Resource
- HRM Human Resource Management
- COR Conservation of Resources Theory
- JD-R Job Demands–Resources

Appendix A. Data Saturation Process Across Interview Waves

Table A1. Data saturation process across interview waves.

Interview Wave	Interview Numbers	Primary Sampling Logic	New Basic Codes Identified	Cumulative Basic Codes	Emerging Organizing Themes	Saturation Status
Wave 1	P01–P09	Initial coverage across managerial positions and countries	20	20	Talent attraction, talent development, employee retention, organizational support	Open exploration

Table A1. Cont.

Interview Wave	Interview Numbers	Primary Sampling Logic	New Basic Codes Identified	Cumulative Basic Codes	Emerging Organizing Themes	Saturation Status
Wave 2	P10–P18	Increased variation across hotel categories, organizational contexts, and leadership roles	11	31	Communication transparency, supportive leadership, employee development, organizational commitment	Major coding framework expansion
Wave 3	P19–P27	Pattern verification across similar managerial positions and organizational settings	6	37	Psychological contract fulfillment, trust, reciprocity, employee engagement, workforce stability	Strong thematic consolidation
Wave 4	P28–P37	Final confirmatory interviews across remaining countries and managerial profiles	2	39	Minor refinements; no new thematic domains identified	Saturation achieved

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