

Enhancing Customer Linking Capabilities in the Hotel Business: The Role of Employee Engagement

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¹*Date of Receiving: 09 February 2026;*

Date of Acceptance: 25 March 2026;

Date of Publication: 07 April 2026

ABSTRACT

This study looks at how employee engagement can improve customer linking capabilities and overall performance in the hotel industry. A study of 150 hotel workers and managers in Dohuk showed that getting employees involved is important for building strong relationships with customers. The most important factor was "cognitive engagement," which means that the employee had a deep understanding of their job. This was more important than emotional and behavioral factors. The study found that employee engagement has a big effect on the hotel's financial and operational performance. The bond is even stronger because of "technological empowerment." The study finds that combining task awareness, human motivation, and the right technical tools can give a business a long-term edge over its competitors.

Keywords: *Customer Linking Capabilities; Employee Engagement; Technology Empowerment; Hotel Performance*

1. Introduction

One of the most important parts of the tourism industry is the hotel business, which is always changing. Employee engagement is very important because happy workers are the most important part of any business. Keeping employees is the biggest problem in the hotel industry, especially for jobs that don't require a lot of skill (Dogru et al., 2023). Employee engagement means that the employee is emotionally committed to the company, which makes them work harder. Along with that, there is often the phrase "employee satisfaction," which means that employees are less committed (Mahmood et al., 2021). This term means keeping an eye on how well an organization meets the basic needs of its employees, which can be compared to their needs. But it doesn't mean that people will want to go the extra mile for the company (Agustian et al., 2023). Employee engagement, on the other hand, assumes that workers want to do what is expected of them and more. Moreover, engagement levels are typically diminished within the tourism sector (Rather et al., 2022). A person must have a positive attitude, be caring toward social interactions with others, be service-oriented, and most importantly, be customer-oriented (Dong & Hon, 2025). It is important to give

¹ *How to cite the article:* Hussein E.A., Alobaidi M., Mijbas H.A., Majeed A.A.A.A (April 2026); Enhancing Customer Linking Capabilities in the Hotel Business: The Role of Employee Engagement; *International Journal of Law, Management and Social Science*, Vol 10, Issue 2, 1-20

employees timely and relevant training in basic guest service jobs, management, and linking customers (Rane et al., 2024). The organization must also be involved when asked.

Customer linking capabilities are the skills that employees need to make customers feel like they are a part of the organization (Malik et al. 2023). Furthermore, CLC facilitates the fulfillment of customer needs and expectations (Charef et al., 2022). Before, during, and after service encounters, customer needs are intertwined with their personal wants, expectations, and perceptions. The way hotel staff treat outside guests is often different from the policies that are used to market the hotel. This can lead to dissatisfaction and loss of credibility because expectations and needs are not met (Jukan, 2019). The primary challenge for hotels is to cultivate the ability to both identify and assess customer needs, as well as to leverage the adaptability of employees in addressing those needs (Seyfi et al., 2024). According to the findings, high employee engagement necessitates the provision of knowledge and skills for management capability, a training culture, and continuous improvement capabilities as enablers of CLC. Empowering environments that feel like family help people work together better and get more done (Kossyva et al., 2024). Empowerment in teamwork should be non-discriminatory and include traits like being fun-loving, helpful, and skilled in many areas. When it comes to cultural mapping, using tree metaphors to separate different cultural aspects can help managers do their jobs better. This study employs Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory to elucidate the mechanism by which employee engagement influences the customer linking capabilities of tourism hotel firms through leisure business engagement, service performance, and service innovation.

2. Theoretical Background

“Engagement is defined as commitment, self-motivation, confidence, enthusiasm, and being dedicated to the job” (Jukan, 2019). Services are not physical things, and delivering a service or product requires the organization, employees, and clients to work together. The five forces come together to make the second-order construct of customer linking capabilities. The ability of employees to connect with customers and their level of engagement are positively related.

2.1. Employee Engagement

The idea of employee engagement, also called work engagement, is becoming more popular in businesses and organizations all over the world (White, 2017). Employee engagement is the emotional connection that people have with their company and its goals. An engaged employee understands the business context and collaborates with coworkers to enhance job performance for the organization's advantage (Riyanto et al., 2021). Employee engagement is a unique attitude and mindset that an employee has that leads to positive energy, immersion in the work role, and a sense of belonging to both the work role and the organization (Pincus, 2023). Many studies have shown that engaged employees are important because they lead to better job performance, job satisfaction, and the desire to stay, as well as less job stress, job burnout, and employee turnover (Suliman et al., 2023).

Engaged employees are likely to improve the hotel business's ability to connect with customers (Liu et al., 2022). Employees who are fully engaged and excited about their work will go above and beyond to make guests happy and help the business reach its goals (Sypniewska et al., 2023). They will probably give customers friendly, helpful service. They will also offer personalized services to customers based on their profiles and preferences (Chandra et al., 2022). These services help the hotel make good connections with customers, which improves the hotel's ability to link with customers.

The term "employee engagement" first came into use in the middle of the 1990s, and over the years, it has been defined in many different ways (Jukan, 2019). When employees are happy with their job expectations and needs, they are

engaged. Engaged employees put in extra effort at work. There has been a lot of talk about the idea in different fields, but at its most basic level, employee engagement means that an employee is actively involved in their work. Organizations must foster positive employee engagement, as engaged employees attain desired outcomes (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021; Charoensukmongkol & Puyod, 2024; Hu et al., 2023). Engaged employees will actively care about and think about their organization, regardless of whether the results are good or bad (Soren & Ryff, 2023). In many fields, employee engagement is linked to higher productivity. To provide the best possible service to customers, companies that want to be the best always look for energetic and enthusiastic workers (Tortorella et al., 2021).

2.1.1. Cognitive Engagement

Employee engagement has been delineated at both organizational and group tiers, as well as at the individual or cognitive engagement tier (Sypniewska et al., 2023). At the employee level, cognitive engagement means being willing to put in effort at work. It can happen when workers are very focused on the task at hand and are learning a lot about the work they are doing (White, 2017). Cognitive engagement is when people think deeply about something. This happens when they know what is expected of them and what the work will be like (Shalley, 2024). Setting performance standards, key goals to reach, and clear duties helps employees understand what the organization wants from them. Employees comprehend their responsibilities through previous experiences, accessible information, and awareness of required tasks (Sakdiyakorn et al., 2021). There are many benefits to both cognitive engagement approaches. Cognitive engagement diminishes the likelihood of cognitive dissonance, wherein contradictory ideas and thoughts foster ambivalence regarding engagement (Buttlar et al., 2025). For instance, employees want to reach or surpass important goals in order to help the company. They perceive opportunities to apply their skills and knowledge innovatively in attaining objectives and results (Susanto et al., 2023). Cognitive engagement helps build an episodic memory to store what has been learned. When employees are cognitively engaged, they automatically scan their surroundings to understand changes (Balarezo et al., 2024). When attention shifts, this kind of deep processing of information and learning stops. It frequently enables employees to formulate conclusions regarding events prior to their consolidation in memory, consequently elevating the probability of those events being forgotten (Ahmed et al., 2022). Cognitive engagement transpires at the individual level, frequently initiated by external stimuli perceived as stressors that induce cognitive overload (Zhang, 2024). Cognitive engagement transpires when the difficulties presented by external stimuli surpass the individual's existing knowledge and skill set (Li et al., 2021). To deal with the demands of the situation, workers put in the time and effort to become mentally engaged at work.

2.1.2. Affective Engagement

Affective engagement in the workplace is the emotional connection an employee has with her job, her organization, and her work duties (White, 2017). Employees who are effectively engaged usually care more about their company and are willing to put in extra work to help the workplace succeed as a whole. An emotionally engaged employee exerts discretionary effort to fulfill diverse roles and responsibilities (Boccoli et al., 2023). Affective engagement has a positive effect on work behavior, performance, and productivity at work. On the other hand, employees who are emotionally disconnected may not care about their job or workplace and may not go above and beyond in their job roles and responsibilities (Abdelwahed & Doghan, 2023; Park et al., 2022; Alshaabani et al., 2021). Emotional disengagement adversely impacts the service experience by diminishing the employee's performance and productivity (Ruppel et al., 2022). Three things can tell you how emotionally engaged your employees are. The first sign is how dedicated the employees are (Aboramadan, 2022). Dedication gauges whether employees perceive their roles as significant, take pride in their workplace, and are prepared to devote additional time and effort to further the organization's success (Boccoli et al., 2023). The second factor that can help predict is altruistic intent. Altruistic intent gauges the employees' voluntary support for their stakeholders, encompassing supervisors, colleagues, and clients (Dawson et al., 2023). The third thing that can help is building relationships. Relationship building checks to see if employees are willing to build and keep real relationships with their stakeholders (Pfajfar et al., 2022).

Affective engagement improves the ability of hotel customers to connect with each other. First, employees who are affectively engaged usually show that they care about their jobs, their responsibilities, and their workplace (Arwab et al., 2023). Affective engagement includes how employees feel about their job, the company, and their experiences (Wong & Liem, 2022). These employees are motivated to design services that create memorable experiences for their customers, show care in how they deliver services, go above and beyond to make sure services are personalized, come up with their own ideas for how to improve services, and coach their coworkers on how to do their jobs well (Nguyen & Malik, 2022). These practices improve how customers respond and act when they have customer service experiences in hotels and other hospitality businesses.

2.1.3. Behavioral Engagement

There are three ways that employees can be engaged in their work roles: physically, emotionally, and behaviorally (Ababneh, 2021). In hotels, employees interact directly with guests and have specific tasks to do. Enhancements in work responsibilities yield substantial competitive advantages. In this regard, it is suggested that managers pay close attention to employees' ideas for changes to their work (Rožman et al., 2023). Hotels should make some simple changes because their employees are very involved, repeat old solutions to encourage more independent participation, and make sure that rewards and compensations work (Arwab et al., 2023).

Employee engagement is when employees are emotionally committed to their companies, which affects how much extra effort they put into their work (Hendriks et al., 2023). In hotels, employees who are engaged are passionate about their work and show their enthusiasm for the company by having positive attitudes and making meaningful contributions (Karatepe et al., 2022). Both academics and professionals have become very interested in employee engagement. Furthermore, as an essential component of constructive organizational behavior, employee engagement enhances job performance. Discretionary effort, beyond basic job requirements, has an impact on customer satisfaction and the performance of the organization (Balkin & Werner, 2023).

The hotel industry is important for the economy, jobs, and the growth of local businesses. Enterprise and tourism hotel engagement, in the face of rising competition from chain hotel groups and the advent of homestay platforms, is a crucial prerequisite for sustainable development (Ka et al., 2023). Tourism hotel employees are the people who connect clients and hotels because they do a lot of different jobs, from service to sales and marketing. Comprehending tourism hotel engagement behavior within the framework of customer linking capabilities is essential for operational success and competitiveness (White, 2017). Nonetheless, there exists a paucity of research dedicated to improving employee engagement and customer linking capabilities within the tourism hotel sector (Patwary et al., 2025; Li, 2021; Arabw et al., 2023). There is a lack of information on how tourism hotels can encourage employees to be more engaged and better at connecting with customers.

2.2. Customer-Linking Capabilities

People think that being able to link customers together is an important part of good customer relationship management (CRM) in business (Jukan, 2019). Customer-linking capabilities are typically regarded as an organization's operational competencies that establish, sustain, and adapt customer relationships (Mohammed et al., 2024). According to resource-based theory (RBT), CRM capabilities are a more general term for organizational capabilities (Qalati et al., 2024). One of the many CRM skills that hotel staff should have is the ability to connect with customers. This includes knowledge, experience, and tools that help build and maintain long-term relationships with customers (Itani et al., 2022). Consequently, customer-linking capabilities can be regarded as the execution and efficacy of employees' customer-linking skills in contexts of customer interaction. These capabilities can be cultivated within an organization

and enhanced collectively through effective motivation and encouragement of employee engagement (Kwon et al., 2024).

2.2.1. Superior Coordination of Functional Activities

In addition to needing ways to share information, hospitality businesses need a cheap way to communicate so that their efforts to improve customer linking can also make them more profitable right away (White, 2017). This study builds on previous research and argues that better coordination of functional activities is important for hospitality organizations to improve their ability to connect with customers. For hotels, restaurants, and clubs to be successful, they need to talk to their customers on a personal level. This lets them make changes to service on the spot, which makes customers happier and more likely to come back (Ogunnaike et al., 2022). If communication systems are unreliable or too expensive, hospitality businesses will not be able to communicate as often, which will make it harder for them to run their businesses every day (Lin et al., 2025). But if hospitality businesses had better ways to talk to customers, they would do it more often, which would lead to more sales and a greater willingness to buy again (Ettinger et al., 2021).

2.2.2. Anticipating and Responding to Changing Market Requirements

The hotel industry today has to deal with unpredictable situations and a lot of competition. Businesses need to build on their organization's potential in order to keep an eye on and respond to changes in the market. This is easier if they can connect with customers through their various touchpoints (Wu et al., 2023). This helps you connect with customers who will stay with you. These capabilities are present when a company keeps an eye on its customers' needs at different levels and makes changes to its products and services to fit the changing market (Kumar et al., 2024). But managers need to make sure that their companies can handle this kind of customer service. Management usually improves people's, processes', and technology skills in the organization to help people develop their capabilities (Uren & Edwards, 2023). But for people-related processes to be good, people need to be very involved in their work (Larsson & Edwards, 2022). Employees are more likely to be engaged if they are personally committed to an organization that cares about their well-being and asks for their opinions on decisions that affect their work (Solnet & L. Kralj, 2010). A hotel that doesn't talk to its employees will never keep and improve the processes that employees use to keep an eye on and respond to customers.

The idea is that in the hotel business, your company can connect with customers if your workers are interested in their work (or the hotel) (Donate et al., 2022). The organization will never be able to improve and support employee engagement if it doesn't get its employees involved in their work (Jukan, 2019). As employee engagement decreases, an organization's capacity to foresee and adapt to evolving market demands will also diminish (Saeed et al., 2022). When employees are engaged at work, they are generally committed to doing their jobs well, interested in finding out what a customer needs, starting procedures to make sure an order is followed, promoting ongoing improvements to the service processes, and taking responsibility for how the organization does its work (Bhardwaj et al., 2023). In other words, employees who are engaged help an organization connect with its customers better.

It makes sense that capabilities include keeping an eye on employees and responding to their organization's service relationship with customers (Ostrom et al., 2021). But because the focus is on employee versus customer touchpoints, this general capability statement is still pretty vague and doesn't help managers figure out how and where to improve staff engagement (HosseiniNasab et al., 2025). It is also important to remember that hotel companies can connect with customers in two different ways (Carvalho & Alves, 2023). In conclusion, the first impression of the hotel business's specific customer linking abilities is that a hotel organization that can predict and respond to changing market needs is one where each employee who interacts with guests is personally committed to making sure their hotel is doing well.

2.2.3. Achieving Competitive Advantage

In the last few decades, customer linking capabilities (CLC) have been very important to the hotel industry. Market-oriented hotel companies want to get ahead of the competition by improving their CLC abilities (Iqbal & Parray, 2024). This research illustrates the importance of employee engagement in improving the customer loyalty capabilities of hotel companies. The results show that employee engagement (EE) capabilities help bring together different groups of employees, processes, and technologies. This makes it easier for them to work together to create service offerings that meet the needs and wants of each customer (Gursoy et al., 2023). You can get CLC capabilities directly by improving customer linking capabilities or indirectly by improving employee engagement capabilities, since better employee engagement capabilities could also make customer linking capabilities better (Aftab et al., 2023). Strategic vigilance, as an environmental scanning capability, adeptly responds to market fluctuations, enhancing customer insight and fostering robust customer linkage capabilities (White, 2017).

More hotels and more customers have made the hotel industry more global. In a market that is becoming more demanding and unstable, hotel companies have to deal with a lot of competition and slow growth (Shi et al., 2021). Hotel companies want to have a competitive edge so they can get better properties than their competitors. This is because having a competitive edge is important for making more money and being successful in the long run. Customer linking capabilities (CLC) are the hotel industry's way of managing customer relationships and market orientation. They help hoteliers learn more about specific customer states by using customer knowledge from a variety of sources in an interactive way (Randhawa et al., 2021). CLC capabilities are an important link between hotel companies' ability to develop a set of practices that give them a competitive edge (Kuo et al., 2022). The findings indicate that hotel companies ought to allocate resources towards the surveillance of competitive activities and market trends, as well as the examination of non-competitive firms' behaviors, to bolster their positional advantage as an alternative strategy for attaining competitive superiority (Kuo et al., 2022; Hushtan & Korsak, 2024; Hornig et al., 2022).

In the last few decades, the ability to link customers in terms of collecting, processing, and using customer knowledge has become a strategically important source of competitive advantage (Mady et al., 2023). Hotel companies have had to deal with the difficult task of creating these linking customer knowledge processes based on the many different types of customer knowledge that are created and shared in hotels, booking sites, and travel agencies (Hornig et al., 2022). The growing importance of customer linking capabilities has created a need for a better understanding of the managerial factors that go into building CLC capabilities (Cao & Weerawardena, 2023). Recent research has shown that hotel businesses can do better when they can link customers.

2.3. The Moderating Role of Technology Empowerment

Employee engagement is a term that describes how employees feel about their work and how they identify with it. For example, it includes how emotionally committed they are to their work, how proud they are to work there, and how likely they are to stay there. According to Prentice and Nguyen (2020), engaged employees are energetic, enthusiastic, and empowered. They are also dedicated, focused, and committed to their jobs and the hotel as a whole (Leung and Lin, 2022; Valk and Yousif, 2023). Employee engagement is acknowledged as a crucial driver in fostering customer engagement within key service sectors (Salem et al., 2023). When employees were given the freedom to do their jobs, they felt more enthusiastic, motivated, effective, and supported, and they were more engaged in two service situations than when they weren't (Kumar et al., 2022). Both AI and service employees worked together to make the service experience better overall.

The service encounter is a main focus, along with talking about how important it is for employees to be engaged. In the context of hotels, there are many kinds of service that use technology. This can include anything from AI chatbots

on hotel websites to empty tables in restaurants, ordering kiosks in the lobby, and room and restaurant bookings with smart assistants on tablets or handheld devices (Štilić et al., 2023). These AI-powered tools help save time and trouble when making room reservations, ordering food and drinks, or getting advice on services or attractions (Buhalis & Moldavska, 2022). More importantly, these powerful tools can make the customer journey more enjoyable, which leads to better service experiences (Ab Aziz, 2008). The AI-implemented service technology facilitated informative and stress-reducing communication with employees, enhanced the likelihood of customer retention and engagement, and fostered rapport (Huang & Rust, 2021). Better service quality indirectly makes customers happier, which then makes them more likely to stay loyal to the company. (Ahmed et al., 2023)

It is recognized that comprehending engagement is insufficient. What type of engagement is necessary to attain customer loyalty and retention is an equally essential aspect of knowledge (Lim & Rasul, 2022; Alam et al., 2021; Rasool et al., 2021). Service mediating networks, whether they involve AI or human workers, are very important for keeping customers interested during service delivery and the evaluation period (Chen et al., 2021). Even though there were differences, AI and employee engagement came from empowerment, enthusiasm, efficacy, and encouragement that directly affected customer engagement and became a role and advertisement for the hotel (Koo et al., 2021).

2.4. Hotel Performance (BSC)

The hotel business is using the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) more and more because there is a lot of competition in the global market. Due to competitive business pressures, many hotels have had to change and find ways to do better (Luo et al., 2022). The performance of a hotel is usually based on how well it can provide a service that adds value to the customer, which affects both the customer and the hotel (Ekhmar Abdul Razak et al., 2016). Therefore, hotels must closely monitor employee performance, especially that of operation managers, as their ability to provide high-quality service is crucial for customer satisfaction (Ali et al., 2021). The hotel industry should stress the use of BSC to help hotel operation managers do their jobs better, since it is one of the most modern tools that can help managers do their jobs better overall (Ledi et al., 2024).

The BSC is a new way for managers to turn an organization's vision into a set of performance measures on a strategy map that will help them reach their strategic goals (Tawse & Tabesh, 2023). The BSC shows what customers want so that management can make a plan, set goals, and make scorecards based on that. The BSC is a very complete tool that can be used to measure both lagging and leading performance measures (Abrokwah-Larbi, 2024). Because many things can affect how well a manager does their job, hotel managers should use a BSC to look at their performance in a complete way (Thirumalesh et al., 2023). Balanced scorecards can measure both financial and non-financial performance. It is important to know how hotel managers feel about the hotel BSC in order to use it effectively to improve managerial performance (Seidu et al., 2022). Three groups of hotel managers' perceived hotel BSC are derived from the BSC hierarchy (financial, customer, internal business processes, and learning and growth) to simulate how they can affect hotel managers' performance outcomes. This is possible because computer simulation software can model complex systems and predict overall trends based on user-defined beliefs and estimates (Jukan, 2019). The findings indicate that hotel managers can improve their performance by adopting a hotel BSC (Stylos et al., 2021; Mio et al., 2022; Elbanna et al., 2022). At first, hotel managers' performance keeps getting better, and then it levels off. Moreover, varying perceptions of hotel BSC influence the performance outcomes of hotel managers in distinct ways (Pereira-Moliner et al., 2021). Using the hotel BSC can help hotel managers do better at running their businesses (Fatima & Elbanna, 2023). This study indicates the necessity for additional research into the perceptions of the hotel BSC among various hotel staff, as well as its impact on multi-level managerial performance and outcomes. Such inquiry could yield a more thorough comprehension of the hotel BSC and its influence on hotel performance.

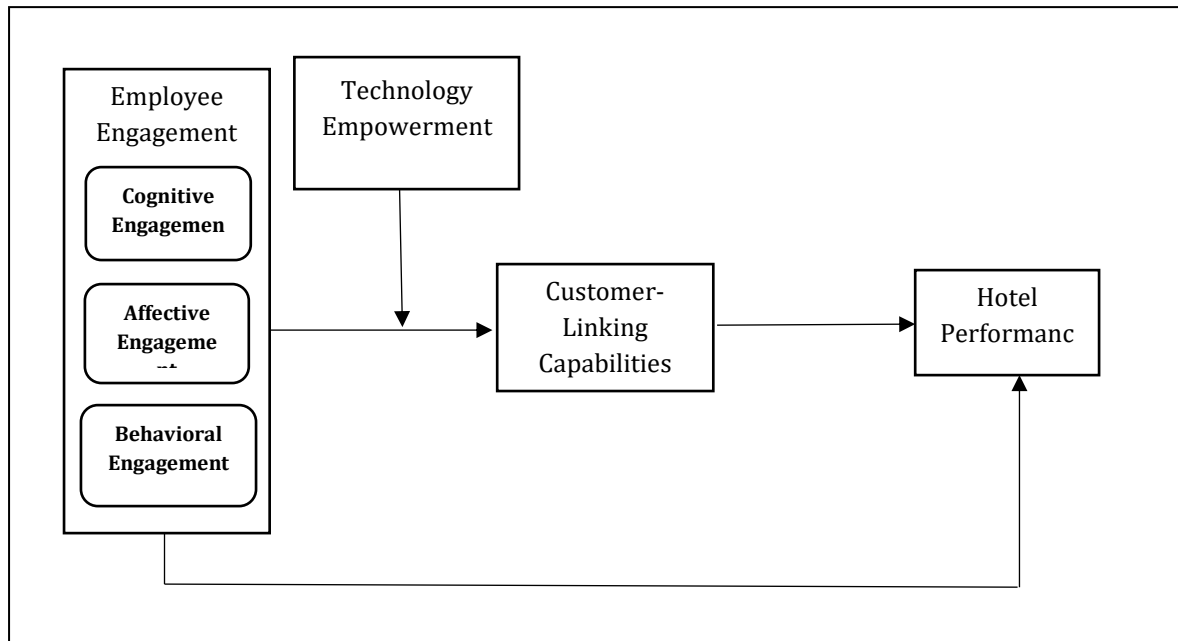


Figure 1: Conceptual model

H1: EE has a positive effect on CLC.

H1a: CE has a positive effect on CLC.

H1b: AE has a positive effect on CLC.

H1c: BE has a positive effect on CLC.

H2: CLC has a positive effect on HP.

H3: EE has a direct effect on HP.

H4: TEs have a moderating effect on the relationship between EEs and CLC.

3. Research Methodology

This study utilizes a quantitative methodology featuring a cross-sectional design. Data were collected from the specified population of first-class hotels in Dohuk Province. This research utilizes a sample of employees from the hospitality industry. The study utilized proportional stratified sampling and convenience sampling techniques. After defining each stratum, the researcher visited the easily reachable employees and handed out the surveys to those who had email addresses that were available and easy to reach.

The researchers chose high-end hotels in Dohuk Province to stand in for the research community. They wanted to choose a purposeful sample of 150 people who worked in senior and middle management at hotels. The researchers sent out 150 questionnaires by email and got back 120 of them. The researchers then sent out 30 more questionnaires, bringing the total number of responses to 150. This was the best way to represent the community.

3.1. Measurement

To meet the study's goals and test its hypotheses, measures were taken from earlier studies to make sure they were valid and reliable. The variable of employee engagement was quantified utilizing the scale formulated by Saufi (2024).

The scale introduced by Day (1994) was used to measure the variable Customer-Linking Capabilities. The scale for assessing technology empowerment was derived from Smith and Doe (2023). Finally, the multidimensional scale from Mohammed et al. (2017) was used to measure how well the hotel did.

4. Results

The descriptive analysis in Table 1 shows that all of the study variables had arithmetic means that were higher than the hypothetical mean (3) and were statistically significant. This means that the basic components of the study were available in the hotels that were surveyed. The independent variable dimensions showed that "emotional attachment" was the most important, with a mean of 3.2920. This shows that employees are more loyal and emotionally attached to their work than anything else. "Behavioral attachment," on the other hand, was the least important, even though it was positive. The "hotel performance" variable, on the other hand, had the most stable statistical value, with a t-value of 5.491. This is a strong sign of high performance levels that logically set the stage for testing the next impact hypotheses.

Table 1: Mean, Std. deviation and One-Sample (Test Value = 3)

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	One-Sample Test Value = 3	
				t	Sig.
Cognitive Engagement	150	3.2720	0.83071	4.010	0.000
Affective Engagement	150	3.2920	0.84238	4.245	0.000
Behavioral Engagement	150	3.1747	0.86274	2.480	0.014
Customer-Linking Capabilities	150	3.2373	0.81870	3.550	0.001
Technology Empowerment	150	3.2147	0.61719	4.260	0.000
Employee Engagement	150	3.2462	0.70815	4.258	0.000
Hotel performance	150	3.2657	0.59258	5.491	0.000

Examining the essential components of customer connection capabilities, with the data in Table (2) demonstrating the outcomes of the primary hypothesis (H1) and its subdivisions. The numbers in this table show that all aspects of employee engagement have a positive and significant effect on customer engagement capabilities. "Cognitive engagement" is the most important factor, with a regression coefficient of 0.533, followed by "emotional engagement" and then "behavioral engagement." When we look at "employee engagement" as a whole variable, we see that it

explains 38.10% of the variance in engagement capabilities, with a very high t-value (9.542). This statistically confirms that employees who are engaged in their work are the foundation on which hotels build their ability to communicate effectively with customers.

Table 2: the variables affecting Customer-Linking Capabilities.

Variables	hypotheses	constant	Unstandardized Coefficients Beta	t-value	R ² %	F-value	Sig.
Cognitive Engagement	H1a	1.494	0.533	7.820	29.20	61.159	0.00
Affective Engagement	H1b	1.592	0.500	7.295	26.40	53.214	0.00
Behavioral Engagement	H1c	1.740	0.472	6.967	24.70	48.540	0.00
Employee Engagement	H1	0.921	0.714	9.542	38.10	91.059	0.00

Next, Table (3) looks at the things that affect "hotel performance." The results in this table show that the second hypothesis (H2) is true: "customer connection capabilities" have a positive effect on performance with a coefficient of (0.459). The most important finding in Table 3, on the other hand, is the one that supports the third hypothesis (H3). It shows that "employee engagement" has a direct and significant effect on performance that is greater than the effect of engagement capabilities. This explains 60.70% of the variance in hotel performance with a t-value of 15.112. This shows very clearly that investing in employee engagement has a direct and strong effect on the hotel's operating results.

Table 3 : the variables affecting Hotel performance.

Variables	hypotheses	constant	Unstandardized Coefficients Beta	t-value	R ² %	F-value	Sig.
Customer-Linking Capabilities	H2	1.781	0.459	9.960	40.10	99.203	0.00
Employee Engagement	H1	1.150	0.652	15.112	60.70	228.384	0.00

Table (4) shows the results of testing the fourth hypothesis (H4) about the moderating effect of "technical expertise." The table shows that adding the moderating variable increased the model's explanatory power (R²) from 64.40% to

72.30%. The increase in the results in Table (4) shows that having technical knowledge makes the link between employee engagement and their ability to connect with customers stronger. This means that hotels get the best results when job enthusiasm (engagement) is combined with proficiency in using technical tools.

Table 4: Summary results on moderating effect on the relationship between Employee Engagement and Customer-Linking Capabilities.

Variables	Before adding the modified variable			After adding the modified variable		
	standardized Coefficients	standardized Coefficients	F-value	standardized Coefficients	R ² %	F-value
	Beta	Beta		Beta		
Customer-Linking Capabilities	0.247	64.40	133.229 (0.00)	1.621	72.30	149.570 (0.00)
Employee Engagement	0.627			4.188		

4.1. Direct Relationship

Multiple regression analyses performed to evaluate the study's primary hypotheses demonstrated a robust and interconnected framework of causal relationships among the variables, with statistical findings validating the theoretical pathways suggested in the model. Upon examining the first and fundamental relationship (H1) linking employee engagement and customer connection capabilities, we find that the data provides conclusive evidence that engaged employees are the cornerstone upon which hotels build their ability to communicate effectively with their customers. The high regression coefficient (0.714) and t-value (9.542) make it clear that any increase in employee engagement will lead to a noticeable increase in the hotel's ability to interact with customers. This variable alone explains 38.10% of the variance in those capabilities.

When we look more closely at the details of this relationship, we see that the different dimensions of employee engagement have different levels of influence. "Cognitive engagement" is the strongest and most influential driver, with a regression coefficient of 0.533. This means that the employee's awareness and deep understanding of what their job requires is the most important factor, even more so than the emotional aspect (which came in second with a coefficient of 0.500) and the behavioral aspect (which came in third with a coefficient of 0.472). This hierarchy of influence helps us understand better that the ability to connect with customers starts in the mind (knowledge), then moves to the heart (emotion), and finally becomes actions (behavior). Consequently, the initial hypothesis and its subdivisions (H1a, H1b, H1c) are completely endorsed and exhibit substantial statistical significance.

The analyses then focus on the second hypothesis (H2), which is about how customer connection capabilities affect hotel performance. The findings indicated that a hotel's robust customer connection capabilities and capacity to fulfill customer needs exert a positive and significant influence on enhancing the hotel's overall performance, with an impact coefficient of 0.459. This outcome is rational and corroborates existing literature; however, the true revelation and

enhanced depth of the analysis manifest during the evaluation of the third hypothesis (H3), which investigates the direct influence of employee engagement on hotel performance.

The results clearly showed that the direct effect of employee engagement on performance is the strongest and most important in the study model, with a very high impact coefficient of 0.652 and an exceptional t-value of 15.112. This means that investing in employees and getting them more involved not only makes their customer service better, but it also directly makes the hotel's operations more efficient and its profits higher. This explains a very large part of the difference in performance (60.70%). This result shows that "employee engagement" is not just an intermediate or secondary variable; it is the main dynamic driver of hotel success, even more so than the direct impact of customer engagement capabilities. This means that the second and third hypotheses must be accepted and treated as established statistical facts based on the sample hotels that were looked at.

5. Discussion

When we look at the study's results, we see that the main point of the discussion is how important employee engagement is for the hotel to be able to talk to customers. The statistics have shown without a doubt that employees are not just people who do tasks; they are also the most important part of building relationships with customers. The most interesting thing that came up in the discussion is that "cognitive engagement" is better than other types of engagement. The regression results indicate that employees' awareness and profound comprehension of their tasks and roles (the cognitive dimension) is the most significant factor affecting their capacity to engage with customers, even exceeding emotional engagement. This means that employees need more than just emotional enthusiasm to connect with customers. They also need to know how business works and what customers expect.

The conversation also shows that there is a strong positive link between investing in employees and the hotel's financial and operational performance. The results showed that employee engagement affects communication skills and that it also explains a large part (over 60%) of the differences in the hotel's overall performance. This means that hotels that don't do well may not have a problem with their marketing or location, but with their employees not being engaged and not being mentally and emotionally connected to their work. The conversation also made it clear how important technology is, as it became clear that giving employees more power through technology doesn't work on its own, but rather as a "boosting" factor. When technical knowledge was combined with employee enthusiasm, results got a lot better. This means that technology is a tool that helps engaged employees do their jobs better.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes with the essential observation that, notwithstanding its growing dependence on digitization, the hotel industry fundamentally relies on the human element. The primary conclusion is that "customer engagement capabilities" encompass not merely management systems or software, but also human behaviors arising from employees who experience a sense of belonging and connection to their organization. All of the study's hypotheses were accepted, confirming that the path to competitive excellence begins internally (with the employee) and is reflected externally (towards the customer). The study also finds that hotels that do well are those that take a holistic approach that combines the psychological (emotional and cognitive attachment) and physical (technology) aspects of the employee. If there is any imbalance in employee attachment, the hotel's ability to respond to changing market demands will suffer, which will lead to a drop in overall performance.

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

In practical terms, this study gives hotel managers, especially those who work in high-end hotels, a clear plan to follow. The management implications clearly show that recruitment and training strategies need to change. Instead of just focusing on technical skills, management should encourage "cognitive engagement" by making sure that employees know what their goals and strategies are so they feel like they are part of the bigger picture. The results also mean that managers need to use technology that doesn't replace workers but instead gives them more power. The study found that "technologically empowered" workers are the best at meeting customer needs. From a theoretical standpoint, the research contributes to the management literature by providing empirical evidence that intangible human resources, such as engagement and loyalty, constitute genuine assets whose financial effects can be precisely quantified, thereby reinforcing theories that associate internal resources with sustainable competitive advantage.

6.2. Study Limitations and Future Research

This study has certain limitations that should be considered when extrapolating its findings, and it facilitates future research endeavors. The study was limited to the province of Dohuk and a specific sample of first-class hotels. This means that the results may not be the same in other cultural settings or for hotels with lower budgets. Consequently, it is advisable to broaden the geographical scope in the future to encompass additional cities or countries for comparative analysis. Second, the study used a cross-sectional design, which only collects data at one point in time. This may not show how employee behavior changes over time. This necessitates longitudinal studies in the future to monitor the evolution of employee engagement and its effects on performance over multiple years. Lastly, the sample consisted of 150 employees and managers. Increasing the sample size in subsequent studies could produce more precise and thorough insights into the dynamics of the employee-customer relationship in the digital era.

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