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Employee Engagement and Autonomy

A Case Study Research in China

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Thesis abstract

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Employee engagement and autonomy are indispensable for a company's work environment, profitability, and brand-building. However, more research is needed on the Chinese retail sector since it is a growing issue in the world's second-largest $18.273 trillion economy. Hence, the study investigates the role of employee engagement and autonomy in the retail industry. A qualitative research strategy has been applied to enrich the knowledge, considering subjectivism, interpretivism, and constructivism research philosophy. Afterward, the study surveyed 30 employees using a semi-structured questionnaire and conducted open-ended interviews with a manager using Microsoft Teams and Surveymars. The collected data were coded using content analysis using Microsoft Office.

The empirical findings show that employee engagement refers to an employee's emotional connection to their job, while autonomy indicates the freedom to make decisions and organize their responsible tasks. Salary and job benefits are the top indicators of employee engagement, along with the work environment and personal growth potential. On the other hand, trust and empowerment are essential for encouraging employee autonomy. Accordingly, employee engagement and autonomy are insightful in a company's work performance. The study emphasizes that Herzberg's theory should consider trust between leadership and employees as a hygiene factor for better applicability since trustworthy communication and support are necessary for a sound work environment.

The research suggests that Chinese corporate leaders should create a trustworthy work setting with flexibility, support, and a certain level of empowerment since leadership practices shape employee behaviors and outcomes. Moreover, employee engagement improves work performance, while autonomy enhances innovation and productivity. To conclude, encouraging employee engagement and empowerment is necessary for better work performance, lowering employee turnover, and facilitating long-run retail business growth in China.

[1] Keywords: Employee engagement, autonomy, work performance, Chinese retail industry

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1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter covers the background, research gaps, aims, questions, and thesis structure. It starts with background information to contextualize the main ideas and practices, explaining why this research is essential. Then, it points out the research gaps—areas where past studies do not cover enough or miss details—showing why this study is needed. Next, it explains the study's gaps, reviewing the previous studies. Then, it illustrates the research question and its objectives. Finally, it outlines the structure of the thesis by briefly summarizing each chapter.

1.1 Background of Study

Companies continually search for ways to enhance employee engagement and autonomy as global competition increases. This helps them stay innovative and adapt to new challenges (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). In fast-changing areas like retail, where a customer needs and trends shift constantly, employee motivation and initiative matter greatly. Studies show that giving workers more freedom improves their creativity. It also makes them feel more responsible and loyal (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). In China's retail market, letting employees have more flexibility with customers can make them more responsive, which is essential for staying competitive. Improving employee engagement and autonomy is closely linked to the increasingly diverse workforce. Today's workplace includes employees of different ages, cultures, and professional backgrounds, and significant changes are seen in how work is done (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). For example, many companies are now adjusting to multigenerational teams and seeing how important cultural diversity is for boosting team innovation.

In a diverse economy like China, businesses need to create management strategies that address the needs of various employees. With this approach, people can connect better, helping them feel like they belong and are recognized for their contributions. The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 changed how people work around the world. Remote work has become the new normal. This change is a big challenge for many companies. Companies struggle to keep employees engaged and committed to their jobs. Remote work gives employees more flexibility and freedom. However, it also reduces face-to-face interactions. This reduction can lead to feelings of isolation. Contreras et al. (2020) found that remote work offered more flexibility during the pandemic. Nonetheless, it also caused less communication and increased loneliness among employees. This situation negatively impacted their engagement.

Companies need to rethink their management strategies. They must find ways to improve employee engagement and motivation. A dedicated employee can improve productivity and company performance. They also tend to be more loyal and satisfied with their jobs. For example, Bakker and Demeroti (2008) pointed out that employee engagement affects individual performance and is closely linked to long-term business success. At the same time, autonomy—i.e., employees' freedom and decision-making power at work—is a critical factor in driving innovation and encouraging responsibility. Many companies focus on giving employees more autonomy to build a more efficient and flexible work environment.

Chinese Retail Mall is notable for its distinctive management approach in China's retail sector. The company has a solid system for developing talent and a fair performance appraisal process, which helps motivate employees with competitive compensation. They prioritize building responsibility and teamwork to foster a positive company culture. Moreover, China’s unique economic landscape, characterized by rapid digital transformation and a diverse workforce, offers valuable insights into how management practices can effectively enhance employee engagement and autonomy. In addition, the Chinese retail mall emphasizes training and development to improve its employees' skills and management capabilities. This approach has dramatically improved employee engagement and teamwork. Its unique culture has created a work environment where employees feel free and like they belong. Therefore, job satisfaction goes up, and the company stays competitive in the market.

Nevertheless, improving employee engagement is not just about one factor; it is a complex process influenced by many things, including the work environment, leadership style, and motivation systems. Kahn (1990) found that employee engagement is closely linked to their emotional, cognitive, and physical involvement in their work. In other words, when employees feel valued and appreciated at work, they become more dedicated. At the Chinese retail mall, management promotes open communication and gives employees much decision-making power, allowing them to express their ideas freely. This approach stimulates their enthusiasm for work. In addition, Deci and Ryan (2000) also suggested that when employees' needs for autonomy, fulfillment, and belonging are met, their internal motivation significantly increases, leading to higher work engagement. Chinese retail malls have given employees enough autonomy by creating an open and inclusive workplace environment, which embodies this theory in their management practices. This approach helps employees feel trusted and increases their sense of ownership and creativity.

Besides, leadership style is critical to improving employee engagement and autonomy. For instance, Bass and Avolio (1994) stated that transformational leadership increases employees' internal motivation, autonomy, and engagement. At the Chinese retail mall, management shows this leadership style by recognizing the unique needs of each employee and encouraging them to collaborate closely with the company. It also makes employees feel supported and appreciated, which leads to more job satisfaction and engagement. This study explores the role of employee engagement and autonomy in an organization by analyzing the management practices at a Chinese retail mall. In the context of the growing remote work trend after the pandemic, it combines domestic and international literature and applied experiences to contribute managerial suggestions for companies to keep their employees motivated and innovative in a complex environment.

1.2 Research Gaps and Aim of the Study

Many studies have looked at employee engagement and autonomy. However, there still needs to be more understanding of these ideas across different types of jobs and new work settings and how those might affect creativity. Most studies focus on fast-growing fields like tech, finance, and manufacturing. Conversely, they overlook other industries like retail, services, and the creative sector. These areas have their work dynamics. For instance, in service jobs where employees work closely with customers, engagement and autonomy play out differently than in tech roles. In creative fields, freedom with teamwork often needs to be balanced, which can affect how engagement is managed (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Looking at engagement and autonomy in these jobs could give a detailed view of how those work in various settings (Chen & Chiu, 2009).

A second gap lies in how autonomy directly affects innovation within teams. Although studies link autonomy to increased engagement and job satisfaction, more is needed to determine whether giving employees greater freedom encourages creative thinking and new ideas or how this might vary across different roles and sectors (Swaroop & Dixit, 2018). For example, research on engineering or product design teams might reveal different impacts of autonomy on creativity than studies in retail or client service roles. Filling the gap could clarify whether autonomy enhances creative performance and problem-solving or whether certain levels of structure are also needed to harness innovative potential (Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Insights into this area would facilitate an organization's structure of autonomy to optimize engagement and innovation, particularly in roles with high demands for creativity. The shift to remote and hybrid work arrangements presents another emerging gap in our understanding of engagement and autonomy. As more organizations adopt flexible work setups, understanding how autonomy and engagement function in virtual settings is increasingly essential (Bošković, 2021; Spreitzer et al., 2017). Remote work often brings changes in communication, reduced social interactions, and unique challenges to maintaining engagement levels. Early studies suggested that traditional engagement strategies may be less effective in these settings, yet more empirical data is needed on adapting autonomy to sustain engagement among remote teams. Future research could investigate how varying degrees of autonomy impact motivation and productivity in hybrid or remote models, exploring best practices for engaging virtual teams (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

Studying the Chinese retail mall industry offers a unique chance. It is advantageous to understand engagement and autonomy since the market is fast-changing and competitive. This context combines traditional work structures with modern retailing trends, providing an environment where engagement and autonomy may impact job performance differently. High customer interactions and rapid change in the Chinese retail industry shape employee engagement differently, providing valuable insights for managers aiming to increase motivation in similarly high-paced industries. Examining engagement and autonomy in the Chinese market can highlight specific practices appropriate for the retail environment, which may be influenced by cultural norms that emphasize hierarchical relationships or customer satisfaction. Decisively, it is essential to solve these gaps since employee engagement and autonomy are critical factors for organizational success. Those affect productivity, retention, and job satisfaction.

Also, organizations must find a balance as digitalization and flexible work arrangements grow. They must support employee autonomy while providing beneficial structures that can adapt to changes (Smith et al., 2016; Taneja et al., 2015). Researchers also claim that imminent research should look at engagement strategies in different industries, explore cross-cultural views, and facilitate practices that support employee well-being and performance (Macey & Schneider, 2008). These insights can help organizations build vital, innovative workplaces that engage employees and empower them to reach sustainable goals. Reviewing the above gaps is essential to enrich the knowledge and understanding of employee engagement and autonomy, particularly within the Chinese retail mall industry context.

Therefore, this study aims to understand employee engagement and autonomy in the Chinese retail mall. First, it investigates the key factors influencing employee engagement and autonomy, focusing on organizational culture. Then, it explores the importance of a sense of belonging and empowerment, which are integral to enhancing employee engagement and autonomy (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Spreitzer, 1995).

1.3 Research Questions and Objective

The earlier discussion regarding employee engagement and autonomy directs the need to answer a fundamental question: What is the role of employee engagement and autonomy within an organization in the Chinese retail mall? Consequently, the specific objectives are:

- To identify employee engagement and autonomy
- To find the critical factors of employee engagement and autonomy
- To investigate employee engagement and autonomy in work performance

This study considers Herzberg's motivation theory to answer the research objectives. Empirically, it also gathers qualitative data from employee feedback and surveys. This helps to understand better how engagement and autonomy affect work performance. The feedback highlights how crucial these factors are for employees and how they influence job satisfaction, retention, and organizational commitment. Ultimately, this study provides valuable suggestions for organizations that want to improve their management strategies. Companies can motivate employees more by building a workplace that values engagement and autonomy. This can help to improve the company's performance and give it a better position than its competitors.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the thesis. This thesis is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter is the Introduction, which provides an overview of the topic and its importance. The second chapter discusses theoretical viewpoints and previous research on employee engagement and autonomy. The third chapter outlined the methodology, explaining how the research was conducted. The fourth chapter is a case study of a Chinese retail mall, where the study analyzed its practices for improving employee engagement. The fifth chapter, titled results and findings, presents the data and insights gathered from the research. The sixth chapter focuses on the discussion of findings, indicates the key factors influencing employee engagement and autonomy, and discusses their implications within the organization. Finally, the last chapter is the conclusion, which summarizes the main points, discusses the study's limitations, and offers suggestions for future research.

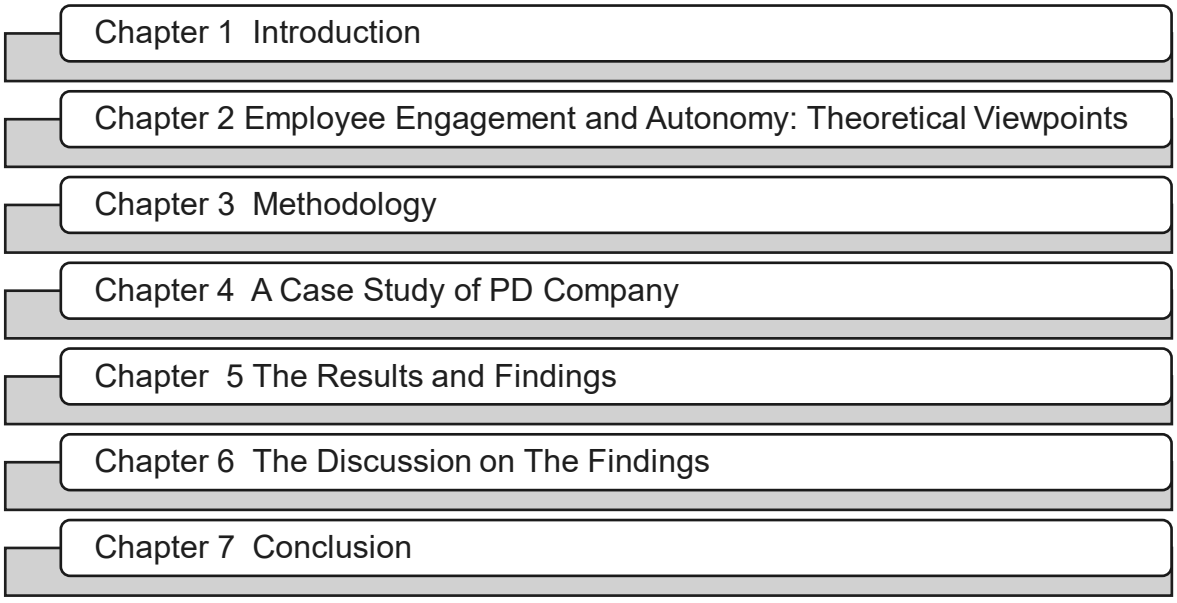

Figure 1. Structure of the Thesis.

2 EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND AUTONOMY: THEORETICAL VIEWPOINTS

Employee engagement and autonomy are crucial topics in contemporary organizational management research. Engagement is generally defined as employees' positive feelings and sense of belonging toward their work (Taneja et al., 2015), while autonomy refers to the freedom and self-determination employees experience in their roles, significantly impacting job satisfaction and overall performance (Madhani, 2020). Recent studies show that enhancing employees' autonomy can substantially improve engagement and boost organizational performance (Swaroop & Dixit, 2018). This section examined how employee engagement and autonomy are connected by covering a few main points: the theoretical framework of the research, the roles of engagement and autonomy in the workplace, the factors that affect them, and how they impact work performance.

2.1 Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

This study uses Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (HTT) as a theoretical framework to explore the critical factors of employee engagement and autonomy. Herzberg proposed the theory in 1959, arguing that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not two extremes of the same dimension but are determined by two different factors (Herzberg et al., 1959). These two types of factors are motivational and hygiene factors. Companies can learn what affects their employees by understanding motivational and hygiene factors. For example, if a business only looks at hygiene factors like pay and working conditions, it might stop people from being unhappy but not improve their engagement. On the other hand, focusing on motivational factors can create a more lively and productive work culture. For example, when employees are recognized for their hard work or have chances to grow professionally, they feel more satisfied and dedicated to their jobs. This kind of dedication raises morale. It also encourages fresh ideas and teamwork. These things are crucial to success in today’s competitive business world. Motivational factors are primarily about how meaningful the work is and how fulfilled employees feel. Herzberg says these factors include feeling accomplished, enjoying the job, having responsibilities, and getting recognition (Herzberg, 1966). Research has shown that employees feel good in these areas and become more motivated and focused (Morrison, 2011). For instance, employees who feel satisfied and see growth opportunities are expected to stay committed and loyal to their jobs.

These factors create a positive work environment where employees do not just complete their tasks; they also want to go above and beyond. This connection between motivation and performance is essential because dedicated employees usually show higher productivity and creativity and are more willing to work with their teammates. Hygiene factors are mainly about the outside environment, like pay, working conditions, company rules, and management's operation. If managed well, these factors can make employees happy but not boost satisfaction. For example, if employees have a terrible work environment or think their pay could be more fair, they likely feel dissatisfied with their jobs. This can lead to lower performance and a negative attitude at work (Spector, 1997). While hygiene factors are essential for avoiding dissatisfaction, they do not motivate employees or make them more engaged. So, it is necessary for organizations to adequately address these factors to build a strong foundation for employee satisfaction. The study looked at how leadership affects employee experiences. Good leaders can make a big difference in motivational and hygiene factors, helping create a work environment that boosts engagement. Leaders who communicate openly, give helpful feedback, and show appreciation for their team's work can improve job satisfaction. Leaders can change their management practices by engaging with employees and knowing their needs to suit their team better. This study looks at how different leadership styles affect how employees see motivational and hygiene factors.

Combined with Herzberg's two-factor theory, qualitative research methods collect employee feedback on their work environment and management style. This study identifies the key drivers affecting their engagement and autonomy by analyzing employees' perceptions of motivation and hygiene factors. Also, collecting information about hygiene factors like pay and working conditions helped companies understand how these aspects lead to employee dissatisfaction. The feedback helps pinpoint the key factors affecting engagement and autonomy. It also gives organizations a valuable way to improve their human resource management strategies. Ultimately, the approach attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice by providing companies with specific recommendations for improving the work environment. By fostering motivational and hygiene factors, organizations can develop a more dedicated workforce that feels valued and empowered, leading to better performance and lower turnover rates. According to Herzberg's theory, focusing on these two factors is critical to building a workplace where employees can succeed.

2.2 Employee Engagement and Autonomy in the Workplace

Employee engagement integrally reflects psychological interventions in the workplace, enthusiasm for work, and concentration (Kundu & Nag, 2021). If employees have higher levels of engagement, there is usually higher motivation, higher productivity, and lower turnover (Smith et al., 2016). Bošković (2021) states that highly engaged employees are more enthusiastic to work to achieve organizational goals, improving the organization's ability to innovate and increasing competitiveness. In addition, Swaroop and Dixit (2018) found through empirical research that there is a strong link between engagement and employee spontaneity and innovative behavior, especially in creative and self-disciplined work environments.

Also, the importance of leadership in employee engagement must be addressed since transformational leadership affects how motivated and committed employees feel. Leaders who motivate and support their teams make employees feel valued. Employees who feel valued are likelier to give their best effort. If leaders share a clear vision and care about their employees' well-being, it helps boost engagement. This is especially important in hybrid work environments. In these settings, not having face-to-face contact can make employees feel lonely. Good leadership is vital to keeping engagement high. It helps employees stay connected to their work and the company culture.

Besides leadership and autonomy, the company culture is essential for boosting employee engagement. A positive culture helps employees feel like they belong to a community. This can affect how engaged they feel at work. Employees who feel part of a supportive and inclusive environment are expected to exhibit higher motivation and commitment to their work. Kahn (1990) found that employees are happier and more likely to stick around when a company has a strong culture that values trust, teamwork, and recognition. Also, companies that promote engagement tend to do better overall. Employees work harder and are more willing to share new ideas that help the company grow. Additionally, Bhuvanaiah and Raya (2014) suggested that employee engagement can strengthen the emotional connection between employees and the organization, thereby reducing burnout and turnover rates. Highly engaged employees show a stronger sense of responsibility and initiative at work, maintain a positive attitude when facing challenges, and prioritize the organization's interests (Taneja et al., 2015). Autonomy is essential in stimulating employee creativity and intrinsic motivation in the modern work environment (Madhani, 2020).

Employees with higher autonomy usually show higher job satisfaction and psychological contracts, which encourages them to be more proactive and take on greater responsibilities in their work. Swaroop and Dixit (2018) emphasized that in remote work or technology-driven industries, giving employees autonomy is particularly important, which can improve adaptability and innovation. Autonomy also enhances teamwork ability. Pattnaik and Sahoo (2021) showed that giving employees more autonomy can improve team collaboration efficiency, especially when dealing with complex tasks. Moreover, autonomy enhances employees' sense of self-efficacy, which helps them connect better with the organization's goals and motivates them to pitch in and work towards those goals (Smith et al., 2016).

2.3 Determinants of Employee Engagement and Autonomy

Existing literature suggests that several vital determinants influence employee engagement and autonomy. For example, Taneja et al. (2015) emphasized that employees find more meaning in their work when they are more engaged, significantly increasing their independence. When people feel invested in what they do, they naturally want more control over how they work. Madhani (2020) also noted that engagement increases intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction, which is essential for creating a positive work environment.

Another important determinant is the culture of the workplace. Bošković (2021) found that a supportive work atmosphere increases employee engagement and autonomy. Employees who believe their work is meaningful will likely take more initiative and generate creative ideas. They feel more accountable when trusted, making them better connected to the organization, which is essential for career advancement. Also, good communication in the team is critical. When leaders share information and encourage feedback, employees feel like they are part of things. Being open like this fosters trust and strengthens the bonds between team members. Good communication also enhances collaboration, which leads to better problem-solving and innovation. Employees are more likely to fully engage in their work when they know they can express their opinions. Furthermore, training and development are essential for engagement and autonomy. Employees who get regular training tend to feel more confident in their skills. This confidence makes them more willing to take on new challenges. Companies that invest in their employees' growth usually have higher engagement levels. Employees are eager to learn and feel valued when they see their company cares about their development.

Moreover, recognition and rewards play an important role. Swaroop and Dixit (2018) emphasized that when employees feel recognized for their efforts, their engagement increases and motivates them to contribute more. This combination of recognition and engagement helps employees cope with work stress better while maintaining motivation and enthusiasm. Pattnaik and Sahoo (2021) mentioned that when employees have more freedom in their work, they tend to be more creative and take initiative. This helps them personally and makes the team more robust, allowing the organization to improve.

2.4 Employee Engagement and Autonomy in Work Performance

Research has found a strong link between employee engagement and freedom at work. Taneja et al. (2015) emphasized that the more engaged employees are, the more they find meaning in their work, and their level of autonomy increases significantly. Madhani (2020) further illustrated that self-regulation stimulates intrinsic motivation and improves job satisfaction, closely related to overall autonomy. Also, Bošković (2021) realized that employee engagement can boost autonomy roundaboutly by encouraging innovative actions and improving the work environment. Employees with the freedom to make decisions and implement them feel more accountable and connected to their teams, which helps them progress in their careers. Swaroop and Dixit (2018) emphasized that this dual role enables employees to better cope with work pressure and maintain high motivation and enthusiasm. Moreover, their performance improves when employees are committed and responsible for their work. For example, they usually get more done because they feel a stronger sense of ownership and are more driven to meet their goals. Pattnaik and Sahoo (2021) mentioned that when employees have more autonomy at work, they are more likely to innovate and show initiative. This helps them grow as individuals and boosts the performance of the whole team and organization. When a team consists of dedicated and autonomous members, they work more smoothly with each other and ultimately achieve better results and higher-quality work.

3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter examines the research methodology, focusing on essential areas like research philosophy, methods, and strategies. It also shows the research design, how to select the sample, and how data was collected and analyzed. Finally, it discusses reliability, validity, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study uses the constructivist paradigm as a primary research philosophy that guides researchers in looking at and understanding social issues (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivism emphasizes that knowledge is built through our social interactions and experiences. This makes it a good fit for exploring employee engagement and autonomy in a workplace setting. Using this approach, the study can gain better insights into how employees at a Chinese retail mall perceive and feel about their work environment. While constructivism is the main focus of this study, subjectivism is also considered, emphasizing that individuals' experiences and interpretations of their environment are unique and shaped by personal perspectives. According to Creswell (2017), subjectivism suggests that people's behaviors and attitudes are influenced by their personal views and interactions. This perspective is crucial for analyzing qualitative data because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how employees interpret their experiences—insights that numbers alone cannot capture. Guba and Lincoln (2005) noted that subjectivists intend to understand complex social issues through the lens of personal stories and lived experiences. Therefore, the study used qualitative interviews to understand how employees view the company's management practices and how these views shape their engagement and autonomy.

Integrating constructivism with subjectivism provides a comprehensive framework for understanding employee engagement. Constructivism helps to understand the social factors, while subjectivism focuses on each employee's unique experiences. This combination creates a fuller picture of how management strategies at the Chinese retail mall influence individual perceptions and behaviors. By understanding these subjective experiences, the study highlights how employees relate to their work and the organization, ultimately enhancing organizational effectiveness (Tashakkori, 2010).

Moreover, subjectivism helps dig deeper into the emotional and psychological aspects that affect employee engagement. Every employee has a way of looking at their job and the company culture. Their views are influenced by what they have been through in their lives. For example, one employee might feel very engaged because of supportive management. On the other hand, another employee might feel left out because of harmful interactions. This difference highlights why looking at individual viewpoints using qualitative methods is essential. These methods let employees share their thoughts and feelings openly. Furthermore, qualitative interviews are a great way to capture employees' experiences. In a retail setting, where jobs can be very different from one another, individual stories can show us things that numbers might miss. Employees can talk about times when they felt empowered or limited by management practices. These stories assist in understanding how these experiences impact their motivation and sense of autonomy. This study recorded employees' feelings and offered practical ideas for improving engagement based on their unique stories.

Finally, this research expects to improve our understanding of employee engagement in the retail sector. The findings could extensively educate similar businesses in the region and elsewhere by studying a Chinese retail mall. Using both constructivism and subjectivism deepens the analysis and helps link the research to real-life situations. This philosophy allows the study to suggest management practices that can create a more engaged and independent workforce, ultimately leading to better results for the organization.

3.2 Research Approach and Strategy

This research uses an inductive approach and qualitative strategy to examine how employee engagement and autonomy affect work performance. The point is to dive deep into employees' experiences, moving from specific examples to broader insights. This methodology helps explore individual perceptions and real-life stories, which is essential for grasping the details of engagement and autonomy in an organization (Creswell, 2017). Data collection included interviews and questionnaires, allowing employees to share their personal experiences, feelings, and views on engagement and autonomy at work. A significant strength of qualitative research strategy is that it highlights unique perspectives and emotions that numbers might miss. Open-ended questions made it possible to see what employees think and why they feel about their roles and decision-making freedom (Fetters et al., 2013).

This method offers valuable context that’s key to understanding the complex dynamics in the workplace and the differences among individuals. This inductive approach implies that there are no strict theories or established assumptions. Instead, insights and themes come from what participants share. This helps to understand how engagement and autonomy influence job performance. This flexibility is essential when dealing with such a complex topic. Listening to employees' personal stories—like what motivates them and how they feel about their autonomy at work—creates a more precise picture based on their experiences.

This research also highlights how important context is for understanding employee engagement and autonomy. Every workplace has its own culture and dynamics. These factors shape how employees see their roles and how much freedom they feel they have. For instance, a supportive team helps people feel more in control. It makes them feel empowered in their work. On the other hand, if the workplace is too strict and controlled, it can take away that feeling of freedom. Looking at these different factors helps to understand how each workplace can shape employee feelings; it shows how workplaces influence job satisfaction; companies need to create environments that support engagement, and they should provide employees with the freedom to do their work well. They should change their approaches to fit their team’s culture and vibe.

Moreover, the qualitative data collected can be helpful for management in getting feedback. When organizations listen to employees, they can understand their needs and worries. This feedback loop can guide changes in policies, help shape training programs, focus on improving employee satisfaction, and boost performance. For example, if employees desire more decision-making, management can implement initiatives that increase autonomy, such as flexible work arrangements or opportunities for self-directed projects. Focusing on employee feedback improves engagement, creates a more positive workplace, and improves overall performance. These findings might not apply in every case, but they offer some beneficial insights. This can guide future research and improve management practices. Focusing on the humanizing aspects of the data makes it possible to explore what matters to employees and how their sense of autonomy affects their motivation and performance. This makes qualitative research a powerful tool for such studies.

3.3 Research Design and Sample Selection

In this study, the research design and sample selection play critical roles in shaping the validity and reliability of the findings. A case study research design outlines organizing and conducting the study to gather the data needed to answer the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, a qualitative approach was used to understand employee engagement and autonomy at Chinese retail malls. This involved collecting data through interviews and questionnaires. For sample selection, employees from different backgrounds and roles were included. This way, the study can obtain various views and experiences, which helps better understand engagement and autonomy (Palinkas et al., 2015). The purpose is to ensure that the findings represent employees' organizational experiences.

Data collection mainly focused on open-ended questions. This allows employees to share their thoughts and feelings about their work and what affects their engagement and autonomy. This qualitative strategy intends to gather detailed information that helps to understand their experiences better (Venkatesh et al., 2013). In addition, the study also used a flexible way to collect data, which fits the needs of the retail setting. Interviews were held in a way that encouraged open conversation so employees could share their thoughts freely. This flexibility is essential, as it might uncover surprising insights and help to understand what affects engagement and autonomy. Making sure participants feel comfortable helps the study gather more details about their experiences and feelings; this strengthens the findings and makes them more relevant.

Moreover, the study included employees from all levels of the organization, from management to frontline workers. This diversity matters because different roles and experiences shape views on engagement and autonomy. Understanding these differences provides deeper insights into how employees feel about their work. This knowledge can guide improvements in workplace practices and policies. Including various voices helps identify common themes, and unique challenges arise for different groups. This understanding leads to better insights into employee experience. It also supports the development of targeted strategies for improvement. This methodology enhances the data collected, the findings are applied throughout the organization, an informed strategy can be created, and all employees' needs are met. The study offers valuable insights into how employee engagement and autonomy relate to management practices by using qualitative strategies for gathering and analyzing data.

The research design and sample selection as a case study set a solid base for looking into these issues, which helped make practical suggestions to boost employee satisfaction and performance (Bryman, 2016).

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Data collection and analysis methods are essential for the success of this study. This study utilized an inductive approach and qualitative research strategy to understand employee engagement and autonomy in Chinese retail malls comprehensively. This methodology collects data through open-ended questions to gain insight into what employees think and feel. The sample is drawn from respondents in the case companies under study. First, data was collected through a survey with open-ended questions using Microsoft Forms, and 30 employees were surveyed. The insights from these responses showed how employees view engagement and autonomy in their jobs. This qualitative data is crucial in understanding their experiences and feelings (Guest et al., 2013). Additionally, Interviews were conducted with a manager using Microsoft Teams to gain a deeper understanding of employees' views. These conversations revealed what motivates them and how they feel about their autonomy at work. The data helped create a clearer picture of the study and strengthen the reliability of the results.

After data collection, the next step was conducting a content analysis. This step involved looking through the data to identify common themes. This helped us better understand employees' feelings about engagement and management strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This qualitative strategy highlights employees' experiences and needs. For data analysis, qualitative data were organized and coded using Microsoft Word. This software made spotting repeated themes and patterns in responses easier. Although qualitative research has some limitations, such as small sample sizes and subjectivity of interpretation, it is well suited to capture the nuances of social and organizational dynamics. Focusing on personal stories and experiences helps better understand how engagement and autonomy influence job performance. This study focuses on a qualitative strategy for collecting and analyzing data. The goal is to highlight how engaged and autonomous employees are in Chinese retail malls while offering valuable insights into management practices (Saunders, 2014). The design seeks to uncover what employees need and expect and provides practical suggestions to boost their satisfaction and job performance. Qualitative data analysis is essential because it helps researchers explore different contexts, personal experiences, and complex social situations in depth.

Content analysis is also one of the primary methods used in this type of research. It works well for finding and counting specific words, themes, or ideas in texts, which makes the data more accessible to interpret transparently. This study used content analysis to examine employee job satisfaction and performance factors. Content analysis is a flexible tool that applies to different research questions and allows researchers to organize, group, and interpret data orderly. Using codes and categories helps to find patterns, relationships, and themes in the data. This approach aligns with our research goal of understanding the critical factors behind the data.

Content analysis helps organize, manage, and store data clearly and systematically. It also makes research more transparent and more accessible to repeat (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2021). However, even though it is structured, content analysis can sometimes make complex ideas seem too simple or lose important context if not done carefully. Content analysis supports a careful look at research findings by allowing researchers to find, group, and study patterns in the data. Since this study is qualitative, content analysis is a good choice for finding key themes and patterns related to our goals. For these reasons, we chose content analysis as the primary method to understand the research results thoroughly.

3.5 Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

In this study, ensuring that the results are reliable and valid is crucial in obtaining trustworthy findings. Reliability means how consistent the data collection methods are and how repeatable the results can be (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Validated data collection tools, like carefully designed questionnaires, were used to improve this. This way, information can be collected uniformly. This approach helps to reduce errors and biases, increasing the study's reliability and providing a solid foundation for future research. Validity is about ensuring the research measures what it is supposed to measure (Bryman, 2016). The questionnaire was designed using existing literature as a guide to do this. The goal is to cover all the critical areas of employee engagement and autonomy. Also, the validity was improved by ensuring the questions aligned with the research objectives. In addition to the questionnaire, interviews were conducted to get more details from the participants. This allowed them to talk about their experiences, share their thoughts, and say how they feel about what is being studied. By letting participants express themselves more freely, the interviews gave a better idea of how they see their work environment, engagement, and autonomy.

Using both methods helped gather more information, making the results more reliable. It also ensured that the study included different opinions, which helped improve the findings and made the study more complete. Ethics is essential in this study; all participants were treated fairly and respectfully. This means obtaining informed consent, so they understand the research and how their data was used. Also, measures are taken to protect their privacy, and all responses stay private and anonymous so participants can feel comfortable sharing their true thoughts. Focusing on ethics also means ensuring the research does not cause extra stress or discomfort for participants. The questions were simple, transparent, and fair, so no one felt pressured. Participants were reminded to leave the survey at any time without any questions, which helped them easily share their true thoughts because they knew their viewpoints were essential. By creating a safe, respectful environment, the study gets better answers, which makes the data more reliable. When participants feel relaxed, the results are more accurate and trustworthy.

How data is used and stored is another critical ethical issue. Participants were fully informed about how their data will be used, stored, and reported. Measures are taken to protect their personal information, and they are assured that their responses stay confidential. This transparency builds trust between researchers and participants, encouraging them to share more honest and accurate answers. Focusing on reliability, validity, and ethics helps create a solid base for research. The real value of this study is that it gives valuable suggestions to improve employee satisfaction and performance. Every participant's opinion is essential, and their views and experiences should be shown. Ensuring they feel safe and respected throughout the research process is necessary.

4 A CASE STUDY OF PD COMPANY

This section introduces Chinese retail malls, including an overview of products and services and their market position. First, basic info about Chinese retail malls is shared. Next, the main products and services are described. Finally, the focus moves to Chinese retail malls' market position and competitive advantages.

4.1 Overview of PD Company

PD Company, a big retail company in Henan Province, China, was founded in 1995. The company aimed to offer "better prices and better service" at a time when fake products were expected. The company pushed for "genuine products only," using joint procurement and cost leadership to keep prices low. The company has earned the trust of its customers by offering services such as free luggage storage and home delivery. In 2023, their sales hit 4.2 billion RMB (around 600 million euros). PD Company operates 13 stores and employs around 11,600 people. They have also received several awards and are a significant player in the local retail market.

4.2 Products and Services

With a diverse range of products and services, PD Company is committed to meeting the needs of all types of customers. This store offers fresh products such as fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, and shellfish, as well as daily necessities such as dry goods, spices, cooking supplies, detergents, and hygiene products. They also offer household products such as healthy food, organic products, kitchen utensils, tableware, and home textiles. It also carries jewelry, medical products, restaurants, and movie theaters. Regarding service, PD company prioritizes improving customer experience by providing expert advice and a simple return process. Home delivery and pickup services are offered depending on buying habits. Memberships such as discounts and birthday gifts are beneficial in building customer loyalty. PD Company's regular offers and experience zones make shopping more enjoyable and enhance the brand's uniqueness.

4.3 Market Position

PD Company holds a significant position in the retail industry in Henan Province, China, and is often called "the most amazing supermarket in China." It is known for its excellent employee benefits, high-quality customer service, and diverse product offerings, making it a market leader. The mall has built a strong brand image and enjoys high brand recognition due to positive customer feedback. This has attracted a large base of loyal customers and many well-known entrepreneurs who visit to learn from its success, turning it into a local tourist attraction, and visitors from other places visit and shop. Each new store opening of PD company attracts large crowds of people, injecting life into the city and surrounding business areas. Without advertising, it opens quietly and still attracts tens of thousands of people. Such news is constantly emerging. It even goes as far as closing 3 hours earlier when sales volumes are high to prevent employees from overworking and ensure the quality of work.

In addition to its retail success, PD company actively engages in community activities and supports the local economy. It focuses on sustainable development and environmental protection, enhancing its social responsibility. The company also focuses on employee development and training, contributing to a positive corporate culture. All these factors combined help PD strengthen its position in the retail industry, making it a trusted customer shopping choice and an essential standard in the sector.

5 THE RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter focuses on analyzing the information gathered from the questionnaires and interviews. First, employee engagement and workplace autonomy are defined. Next, critical determinants of employee engagement and autonomy are identified. Finally, the chapter examines how employee engagement and autonomy affect overall job performance, including how they influence creativity and productivity. The questionnaires used for this analysis can be found in Appendix 1.

5.1 Defining Employee Engagement and Autonomy in the Workplace

As part of assessing employee engagement and autonomy in the retail sector, this sub-objective seeks to clarify these concepts within retail stores in China. The question is: How do you define employee engagement and autonomy at your retail store? The responses from the company are considered valuable insights. Below is a summary of the findings from the interview with a manager:

> Employees' engagement is reflected in their love of their work and identification with the company's goals, their willingness to invest their time and energy while actively seeking improvements, collaborating with colleagues, and remaining loyal to the company's long-term growth. (H1)

Employees' autonomy is reflected in their ability to make independent decisions, organize tasks flexibly, actively explore innovations, and take responsibility for the results of their work to increase efficiency and adapt to change. Regarding autonomy, employees mention that it is about having the flexibility to organize their work schedules or methods and having room for trial and error and innovation. The company lets employees decide independently, try different ways, and test ideas. This keeps the workplace lively, open, and running smoothly.

5.2 Identification of Determinants of Employee Engagement and Autonomy

Survey and open-ended interview responses were analyzed to identify the key determinants of employee engagement and autonomy at PD company. The question is: What are the factors of employee engagement and autonomy? The answers are obtained from questionnaires and interviews.

As shown in Appendix 2, the survey results indicate that salary and benefits are the most critical factors affecting employee engagement, with 96.7% of employees saying these are very important. This shows that employees care about their financial security and rewards. Also, 83.3% pointed out that having a supportive and comfortable work environment is essential, which means that physical and social conditions matter greatly for their motivation and satisfaction. Additionally, 80% of employees appreciate opportunities for personal growth, highlighting the company's importance of professional development. The interview with a manager reflected these findings:

> Respondents say that the work environment, recognition, rewards, chances for development, work-life balance, support from management, and teamwork are all key to keeping them engaged. (H1)

Many employees believe that improving their skills motivated them, and advancing their careers helped them gain confidence. Training and learning opportunities from the company make work more satisfying and help everyone get better at what they do. This is key for staying with the company and for personal growth. These changes show that the company cares about its employees and their future, not just what workers do today. When this feeling is present, motivation to give their best in tasks increases. Team dynamics were noted as particularly influential, with 73.3% of survey respondents pointing to relationships with colleagues as crucial for maintaining morale and positive engagement. While less impactful, the challenge presented by tasks was noted by 66.7% of employees as relevant to their engagement, reflecting that some employees are motivated by opportunities to challenge and develop themselves further. Support from leadership and the company's mission was rated lower in importance, with 60% and 53.3%, respectively, which may suggest areas for further improvement regarding leadership support and alignment with organizational goals.

For autonomy, trust and empowerment were found to be paramount. As shown in Appendix 3, all surveyed employees (100%) indicated that trust from leadership directly impacts their autonomy, highlighting the need for an environment where employees feel empowered. This theme was strongly reinforced in the interviews with a manager:

> It is important to arrange tasks flexibly, make decisions, and set their own goals. (H1)

Employees say that open and transparent communication affects how much autonomy they feel. Many have noticed that when management shares the company's goals and expectations, there is more direction and focus in making decisions and getting things done. This transparency builds trust and helps everyone feel confident trying new ideas. An open communication environment also cuts down on misunderstandings and lets workers be more independent in what they do; being able to independently handle customer issues, set their own goals, and manage their tasks without excessive oversight significantly boosts their sense of autonomy, reducing feelings of constraint and encouraging proactive, creative engagement. Further factors influencing autonomy included leadership style and employee skills, chosen by 60% of employees, while company culture and work complexity were highlighted by 46.7% and 36.7%, respectively. Feedback showed that leadership plays a significant role in autonomy. However, it is just as important for leaders to find a good balance in their guide. Giving employees enough freedom helps them use their skills to reach the company's goals.

5.3 Assessment of Employee Engagement and Autonomy of Work Performance

Evaluating employee engagement and autonomy reveals their significant impact on job performance. Regarding the effect of engagement on overall job performance, the question is: How much do you think engagement impacts your overall job performance? What impact do you believe autonomy has on employee innovation? When you have higher autonomy, do you feel more productive? How do employee engagement and autonomy affect work performance? The results show that 12 employees (40%) believe engagement has a huge impact and that their performance is closely tied to their engagement. Appendix 4 shows that 10 employees (33.3%) think engagement significantly drives their performance.

Seven employees (23.3%) feel that engagement has some impact, but it is not the main factor, while just one employee (3.3%) believes it has almost no effect. This data shows that most employees believe engagement is essential for job performance and crucial to their work outcomes. Engaged employees are more committed to their jobs and offer better customer experience, which helps boost customer satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, it is essential to build a culture that values employee engagement and autonomy. This changes the rules in the workplace. When employees feel listened to and appreciated and can share their ideas, it creates a new vibe. The vibe in the workplace changes completely. Everyone starts to feel more connected and motivated. This makes teamwork not just stronger but a lot more enjoyable, too.

Everyone feels more connected, and that positive energy leads to better collaboration and success. Many employees said that being part of a supportive team makes them want to contribute more. This sense of community leads to new ideas and solutions that help the organization.

The results regarding the impact of autonomy on employee innovation show that 12 employees (40%) believe autonomy strongly promotes innovation. Appendix 5 shows that 11 employees (36.7%) think autonomy encourages innovation, while 6 (20%) feel it has no significant impact. Only 1 employee (3.3%) believes that autonomy limits innovation. These findings indicate that most employees see autonomy as positively affecting innovation, especially in encouraging innovation. The third question examined whether employees feel more productive with higher independence. As shown in Appendix 6, employees (46.7%) said that more autonomy makes them more efficient. Meanwhile, 11 employees (36.7%) sometimes feel more efficient, 3 employees (10%) reported no significant change, and 2 employees (6.7%) believe that too much autonomy negatively affects their productivity. These results suggest that most employees think having more autonomy can improve their work efficiency, but some disagree. The interview with a manager also showed that:

> When employees are highly engaged and have more autonomy, it helps reduce turnover rates, which means the company spends less on hiring and training new staff. Employees with the freedom to make decisions are more likely to develop new ideas to improve services and processes, which is great for the company's long-term growth. (H1)

Additionally, organizations focusing on engagement and autonomy usually keep their employees around longer. When people feel valued and empowered, they are much less likely to look for jobs elsewhere. This saves companies money on hiring and training new employees and helps create a strong team of experienced people. Stability in the workforce improves overall performance, as experienced employees tend to be more efficient and effective in their jobs. So, making a place where people feel engaged and free to take charge is essential for lasting success. In short, encouraging employee engagement and autonomy is vital for improving work performance and achieving positive organizational results.

6 THE DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

This chapter provides a comprehensive look at employee engagement and autonomy in the workplace. It examines how common and effective these qualities are in real-life workplaces. Next, the determinants of employee engagement and autonomy are explained, revealing the factors that most influence these attributes. Finally, this chapter shows how employee engagement and autonomy affect job performance and how these qualities create positive organizational outcomes.

6.1 Evaluation of Employee Engagement and Autonomy in the Workplace

When looking at employee engagement and autonomy in the retail sector, it is essential to see how these ideas play out in real life, especially in retail stores in China. The main question for this research is: What is the role of employee engagement and autonomy within an organization? Company PD's study results show that employee engagement is about having a strong emotional connection to the job. Staying in line with the company's goals is essential; workers care about what they do and are ready to put in time and effort. Wanting to improve things is necessary, getting along with coworkers helps, and being loyal to the company for the long haul counts a lot. This matches earlier studies, like the one by Hakanen et al. (2006), which found that employee engagement links closely to emotional connections and organizational commitment.

Additionally, employee autonomy means having the ability to make decisions and flexibly manage tasks. Many employees said this freedom helps them try new ideas and take charge of their work. This leads to greater productivity and better adaptation to change. This supports the research by Deci and Ryan (2000), which points out that autonomy is a basic psychological need that drives internal motivation. At PD company, there is an exciting point about autonomy in retail stores in China. Cultural factors influence how employees see and use their freedom at work. While most studies focus on material rewards and traditional ways to improve engagement and autonomy (Saks, 2006), the findings from PD company show that they need to understand employee feelings better. Employees at PD Company feel a strong sense of belonging and connect well with the company's goals. This supports research that says engagement is not just about outside factors (Hakanen et al., 2006).

When looking deeper into these ideas, it is essential to see how management support helps with employee engagement and autonomy. Employees at PD Company said that the atmosphere improves when leaders encourage open communication and give guidance without being overly controlled. When support is vital, employees feel better about sharing their ideas. It makes them more willing to take charge of their work; It also encourages them to take the lead in their work. Managers who create a trusting and respectful culture allow employees to take ownership of their tasks. This kind of environment encourages more motivation and sparks creativity. Moreover, training and development opportunities are essential for improving engagement and ownership. Employees feel that when companies invest in their professional growth, skills get better, and commitment to the organization grows. Joining training programs and workshops helps employees discover new ideas and sharpen their skills. This focus on personal growth makes everyone feel like they belong and inspires workers to dive into their roles. Overall, emphasizing management support and ongoing development can significantly improve employee engagement and autonomy in retail.

In summary, these findings clearly show that engagement and autonomy are essential. Both play a significant role in creating a positive work environment at PD company. Focusing on building emotional connections and letting people make decisions can improve job satisfaction and help the organization run more smoothly. Research could investigate how to adjust these ideas for different cultures and help clarify how these factors impact employee performance.

6.2 Interpretation of Determinants of Employee Engagement and Autonomy

The study at PD company discovered what is essential for employee engagement and autonomy by using surveys and open-ended interviews. The survey showed that salary and benefits are the most critical factors for keeping employees engaged. About 96.7% of employees said these things matter. This matches what Saks noted in 2006. He pointed out that having financial security motivates workers. Also, 83.3% of employees said a supportive and cozy work environment is essential. This shows that both physical space and the social vibes at work matter greatly in keeping people motivated and happy, just as Hakanen et al. (2006) pointed out. Furthermore, 80% of employees stressed the importance of opportunities for personal growth, which is connected to Deci and Ryan’s (2000) research on intrinsic motivation's role in engagement. During the interviews, employees discussed the importance of recognition, growth chances, work-life balance, and teamwork for staying engaged.

The survey also showed that 73.3% value good relationships with coworkers. However, support from leadership and alignment with the company's mission got lower ratings, at 60% and 53.3%. These factors matter, but more attention may be needed to improve employee engagement. In addition, this finding differs from previous research, which usually considers leadership support the most critical factor. The study found that trust and empowerment are crucial to employee autonomy. Every employee said that trust in leadership affects how independent they feel. This supports the findings of Conger and Kanungo (1988), who noted that empowerment is essential for increasing autonomy. Employees said that organizing tasks flexibly matters; they also value the freedom to make decisions. This increases a sense of independence. Engagement and autonomy increased if workers could handle customer issues, set personal goals, and manage tasks with less supervision. Leadership style and employee skills were seen as necessary for autonomy by 60% of the respondents. This shows that leaders need to find a balance. The idea that they should encourage independence while still giving guidance is like the findings of Amabile (1996), who said that a supportive leadership style increases creativity and motivation. On the other hand, 46.7% and 36.7% of employees mentioned company culture and job complexity, respectively. This implies that although these factors are essential, they are less influential than trust and empowerment.

Moreover, knowing how employees feel about recognition and appreciation helps them understand engagement levels. Many workers mentioned that when hard work gets recognized, it pushes them to improve. This shows how important it is to acknowledge each other at work; recognition plays a significant role and helps create a positive workplace. Exploring how work-life balance affects overall satisfaction can provide valuable insights. Companies that promote a healthy balance often have lower stress levels and higher productivity. In summary, the results from PD company match what earlier research found. It shows that financial rewards and supportive environments are essential for employee engagement. They also stress the importance of building trust and empowerment for employee autonomy. Future research could investigate how these factors work together in different cultural settings, especially in retail, where things can vary.

6.3 Explanation of Employee Engagement and Autonomy on Work Performance

Evaluating employee engagement and autonomy shows that both are important for job performance. First, many employees see engagement as key to how well they do their jobs. For example, 12 employees (40%) believe engagement dramatically affects their performance. This shows a strong connection between their commitment to work and how they perform. This idea matches earlier research by Saks (2006), which found that higher engagement leads to better job performance. Also, 10 employees (33.3%) think engagement drives their performance. This backs up the findings of Bakker and Demerouti (2007), who said that engaged employees are usually more motivated and provide better customer service, which boosts overall satisfaction and loyalty. Second, the findings indicate that 12 employees (40%) feel autonomy strongly promotes innovation. This supports the research by Conger and Kanungo (1988), which points out that empowerment and autonomy are essential for boosting employee creativity and innovation. Additionally, 11 employees (36.7%) think that autonomy encourages innovation. In contrast, only 6 employees (20%) believe it has little impact. This demonstrates that the majority recognize the positive influence of autonomy on innovation, a finding that complements research by Amabile (1996), who suggested that supportive environments with high autonomy boost creativity.

Furthermore, the results indicate that autonomy also enhances productivity. As noted, 46.7% of employees reported feeling more efficient when granted higher independence, while 11 (36.7%) sometimes felt this way. This resonates with findings from Deci and Ryan (2000), which state that intrinsic motivation, fostered by autonomy, leads to higher performance and satisfaction. While some employees (10% and 6.7%) said that autonomy either had no real impact or hurt their productivity, most results show a positive link between autonomy and work efficiency. Finally, the interviews supported these findings by showing that turnover rates drop when employees have higher engagement and independence. Workers who feel empowered to make choices are more likely to develop new ideas that improve services and processes. This matches the research by Hakanen et al. (2006), which shows that engaged employees tend to stay with the company longer. This is good for long-term growth. In summary, encouraging employee engagement and autonomy is essential. It improves job performance and leads to better results for the organization. These findings back up current research. They show how engagement and autonomy enhance job performance in the retail industry.

7 CONCLUSION

This chapter provides the study's key findings and explains why they matter. It also connects these findings to relevant theories and discusses their theoretical implications. Next, it discusses what managers and leaders should consider based on the results. The chapter also explores how the findings can impact government policies. Finally, it shows the study's limitations and suggests ideas for future research.

7.1 Summary of the Research

This study examines the role of employee engagement and autonomy on job performance. It focuses on a retail store in China. The main goal is to understand what factors influence employee engagement and autonomy. At the same time, knowing how these factors affect overall job performance is essential. To get information, the study used surveys and open interviews. The results say employee engagement means feeling close to the job and reaching the company’s goals. Engaged employees enjoy what they do. They want to spend time and energy and always look for ways to do better. They get along well with their coworkers and are loyal to the company, and employee autonomy means they can make their own choices and plan their work. Employees want to be able to explore new ideas and take responsibility for their work. It shows that employees who feel trusted generally enjoy their jobs more. They also perform better when they feel empowered.

The study discovered several essential factors that affect employee engagement. First, salary and benefits are significant. About 96.7% of employees said these factors matter a lot. A supportive work environment is critical; 83.3% of employees said it affects their motivation and happiness. Finally, chances for personal growth are significant. About 80% of employees value chances to develop their skills. The study also shows how important communication is for employee engagement and autonomy; open and transparent communication lets employees share their concerns and ideas and helps workers feel more connected to the company. About 70% of employees said regular feedback from managers increased their engagement. Feedback helps people see what they do well and what they can improve. Many workers said knowing the company’s long-term goals helps them align more with its vision. This motivates workers to put in more effort. Good communication is not just about giving instructions. It also builds a sense of community and shared purpose.

Another interesting finding is the role of work-life balance in enhancing engagement and autonomy. The retail store is hectic; It can take time to maintain a work-life balance. However, the study found that employees with flexibility in scheduling or workload felt a stronger sense of autonomy and engagement. About 75% of employees indicated they feel more motivated and less stressed when they can manage their time or take breaks as needed. This shows that giving employees control over their work-life balance can increase job satisfaction and productivity. It is suitable for both the employees and the company.

For autonomy, trust from leaders is crucial. Every employee surveyed (100%) said that trust directly affects how much autonomy they feel. The research showed that employees appreciate being able to arrange their tasks, make decisions, and set their own goals. They believe that this freedom helps them work better and be more creative. The study also strongly linked engagement, autonomy, and job performance. Many employees (40%) think engagement dramatically affects how well they perform; they believe engagement results in better outcomes and improves customer experience. Likewise, autonomy is viewed as a critical factor for innovation. Around 40% of employees feel that having more freedom helps them generate new ideas. However, some employees were worried about having too much freedom. About 46.7% said that more autonomy would help them be more productive, but others thought too much freedom could be confusing. It shows that autonomy is essential, but guidance is also needed.

In short, this study shows how important it is to increase employee engagement and autonomy to improve job performance. Employees who feel involved and trusted do their work better, develop more ideas, and stay focused. This makes customers happier and helps companies meet their goals in the competitive market. Ultimately, the study says creating a friendly place for employees is essential. The focus is on making a workplace where everyone can do their best.

7.2 Theoretical Implications

This study uses Herzberg's two-factor theory to explore employee engagement and autonomy. This theory separates motivational factors that improve job performance from hygiene factors that stop dissatisfaction. Research has shown that when employees are motivated by incentives, such as feeling successful and being recognized, it increases their sense of engagement. When employees are dedicated, they commit more to their jobs. It helps them work better and develop new ideas when they are engaged. Autonomy is also a key motivator. When employees get to decide things for themselves and set up their tasks, they feel more accomplished. It also makes them feel recognized for their work. In turn, it increases their engagement. Organizations need to create supportive environments for both engagement and autonomy. This means giving people work on those matters, celebrating their achievements, and helping them grow in their careers. Things like salary, job security, and good working conditions only sometimes directly improve how well people do their jobs. However, if these things are included, it can make people happy and affect the whole team's performance. This shows that paying attention to motivational and basic needs is essential. Looking at both can help people do their jobs better and make them more committed to the company. This supports Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory in today’s workplaces.

This study also points out that employees in China’s unique culture may react differently to autonomy and motivational factors, showing that Herzberg’s theory can be applied more broadly. Creating a supportive, trust-based organizational culture can also motivate employees and improve innovation and teamwork. Giving employees more freedom helps them feel more confident, directly improving their performance and creativity and making the company more competitive. In addition, training and development help workers feel more engaged and independent. When the company helps employees with their skills, they feel vital and strong. This also increases their confidence and encourages them to take initiative and be more creative. Employees who get good training can deal with challenges more efficiently, which makes them happier at work and more loyal to the company. Offering learning opportunities is suitable for both workers and the business. Finally, giving regular feedback and talking helps workers feel involved and independent. Employees who get helpful feedback know how they are doing and how to improve. Good communication builds trust and makes everyone feel like they belong.

Workers who feel heard and appreciated are likely to be engaged and motivated—the open talks about goals and challenges to improve teamwork and the workplace. In short, putting time into training, giving feedback, and having good communication backs up Herzberg’s ideas. This helps workers feel more involved and do their jobs well.

7.3 Managerial Implications

This study highlights several actionable strategies managers can implement to enhance employee engagement and autonomy, boosting work performance in retail settings. Since salary and benefits emerged as top factors for engagement, managers should prioritize competitive compensation and rewards packages. Clear, consistent rewards for good performance support employees' financial security, which is crucial for their commitment and motivation. A supportive work environment is essential because employees like a positive and comfortable workplace. Managers should create a space where teamwork and open communication are encouraged. Doing simple things, like helping teams work together and planning fun events, can make it easier for people to connect and feel good at work. Providing opportunities for growth and development is also critical for sustaining employee engagement. Managers can introduce structured professional development programs and provide access to external learning opportunities. Training sessions that help build skills and show straightforward ways to move up can make employees feel important and cared for by the company. Autonomy is all about trust and empowerment. Managers should let employees make decisions about their jobs and support them in solving problems independently. When managers let workers decide how to do their tasks, choose their goals, and chat with customers, they feel more in charge. This can boost creativity and improve their attitude at work.

Autonomy is essential, but more freedom with support can help productivity for some workers. Managers need to find a balance. They should give help and feedback when needed but also allow for flexibility in their leadership. This way, workers can show what they are good at and still help the company succeed. Work-life balance is essential for employees' engagement and satisfaction with their jobs. Managers should consider letting workers have flexible schedules and remote work options and regularly check how much work they have. A system to see how employees are doing can help find those burning out.

Then, managers can step in and offer support, like counseling or adjusting schedules, to help keep them from leaving the company. Finally, when managers give employees more freedom, they are more willing to try new ideas and improve. If the company encourages everyone to improve, it will make employees happier and help the company grow and do well in the future.

7.4 Policy Implications for the Company and Government

This research shows that companies can improve employee engagement by offering more training and creating a supportive environment. Giving employees flexible hours can help them balance work and life better. Recognizing their hard work with bonuses or promotions made them feel appreciated and motivated. A positive company culture where employees feel respected is vital to improving job satisfaction and lowering turnover. All these efforts can lead to a more engaged team and better company results. Therefore, a company should consider employee engagement and a supportive environment in long-term policymaking. This research shows that the government can help employees in Chinese retail malls. It can make them feel more engaged. It can also give them more freedom at work. They could provide companies with tax breaks or money to help improve employee training. The government can make rules for flexible work hours, which allows employees to balance work and personal life better. Training programs should focus on building skills that align with business objectives and enhance job satisfaction. These programs can help employees grow and learn new skills. This can make them feel more appreciated and involved in their jobs.

The government should also encourage programs that help workers' mental health and well-being. They can provide support like counseling services or stress management workshops to help workers handle job stress. Workers are likelier to stay engaged and motivated when they feel supported mentally. A healthy workforce is essential for boosting productivity and lowering turnover rates in retail. Finally, the government should check and update labor laws to improve work conditions. This means ensuring workers get fair pay, work safely, and protect their rights. Managers and workers should be able to talk easily with each other. This helped solve problems and create a supportive work environment. These changes can help retail workers feel more engaged and have more freedom, also make them happier, improve their work, and help the retail market in China grow.

7.5 Research Limitations

This research gives some valuable ideas on improving employee engagement and autonomy, but there are a few things to remember when considering the results. First, the study only looked at a small group of employees from a Chinese company, which means their views may only partially represent the larger employee population. Because of this, it might not reflect the wide range of experiences that different roles and industries have. This could make it harder to apply the findings to other settings. Second, this study mostly used questionnaires and interviews for data collection. While these questions let employees express their honest thoughts and feelings, how they interpret them can vary. Some employees might need help to share their views, especially on sensitive topics. Additionally, this study focused on how engagement and autonomy affect employee performance, but it did not consider other factors that could also play a role. For example, market changes or company strategy shifts can affect employees' feelings and performances. Also, the study did not investigate how employee personal differences could affect the results. Age, gender, and work experience affect employees' reactions to engagement and autonomy.

To sum up, this research gives precious insights into employee engagement and autonomy, but there are some things to consider when looking at the results. The small group of participants uses questionnaires and interviews and focuses on only a few factors, limiting how much the findings apply to other situations. Future studies could involve a more extensive and varied group of employees and look at other factors, like company culture or outside economic changes. This helped get a clearer picture of what affected how employees felt and performed at work.

7.6 Suggestions for Future Research

In future research, looking at different sides of what affects employee engagement and autonomy would be helpful. First, including people from various industries and companies of different sizes would make the study more complete. For example, Chinese companies have their own culture and management style. Looking at similar companies could show how their culture affects employees. It might impact how engaged and independent they feel. This is especially true when the economy or market changes. Additionally, future research could dive deeper into employees' different needs and responses regarding engagement and autonomy at various job levels. The needs of upper management might be very different from front-line employees, which could lead to entirely different impacts on their work involvement and autonomy.

In addition, the rise of new trends like technological advancements and remote work offers new directions for future research. As work styles change, figuring out how companies can maintain employee engagement and autonomy in a digital environment has become critical. Future studies could look at best practices for virtual teams and remote management, exploring how flexible management styles and digital tools can enhance employee autonomy and involvement. Lastly, future research could look at things from a psychological and behavioral angle. This might include studying how employees' inner motivation and personality traits connect to their engagement and autonomy. Doing so would help us better understand the differing needs of various employee groups.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Employee Engagement and Autonomy Survey

Appendix 2. Key Factors Affecting Engagement

Appendix 3. Key Factors Affecting Autonomy

Appendix 4. The Impact of Engagement on Overall Job Performance

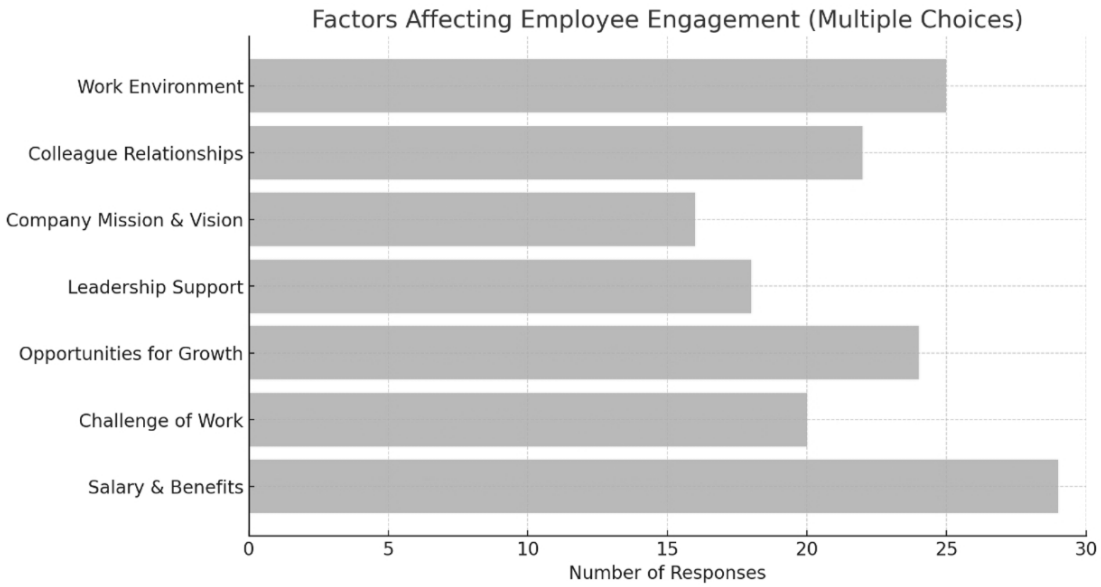
Appendix 5. The Impact of Autonomy on Employee Innovation

Appendix 6. Whether Higher Autonomy Leads to Increased Productivity

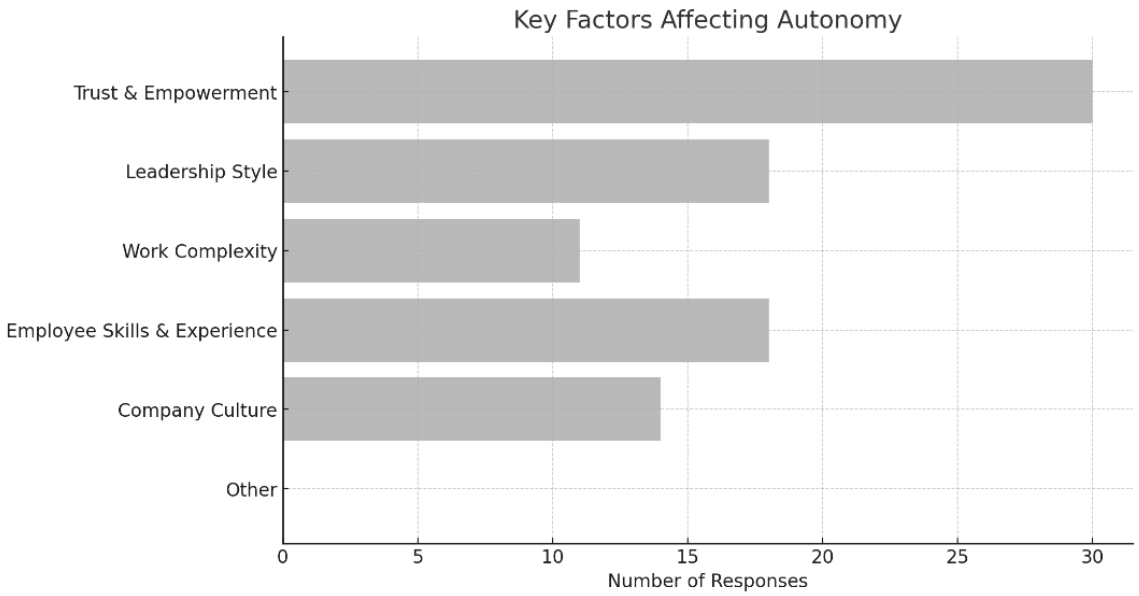
Appendix 1. Survey and Open-ended Interview

- Which factors significantly affect your engagement? (Multiple options) Salary and benefits, Challenges of the work, Opportunities for personal growth, Support and guidance from leadership, Company mission and vision, Relationships with colleagues, Work environment, and others (please specify)
- Which factors are most important in determining employee autonomy? (Multiple options) Trust and empowerment, Leadership style, Complexity of the work, Employee's skills and experience, Company culture, Other (please specify)
- How much does engagement impact your overall job performance? It has a considerable impact; my performance is closely related to my engagement. Engagement drives my performance. It has some effect, but there are other factors. It has little impact.
- What impact do you think autonomy has on employee innovation? Strongly promotes innovation, Promotes innovation, No significant impact, Limits innovation
- When you have higher autonomy, do you feel more productive? Yes, more autonomy makes me more efficient. Sometimes, I think it is more efficient, but I have yet to notice a significant change. Too much autonomy negatively affects my productivity.
- How do you define employee engagement?
- How do you define employee autonomy?
- What are the factors of employee engagement?
- What are the factors of autonomy?
- How do employee engagement and autonomy work on work performance?

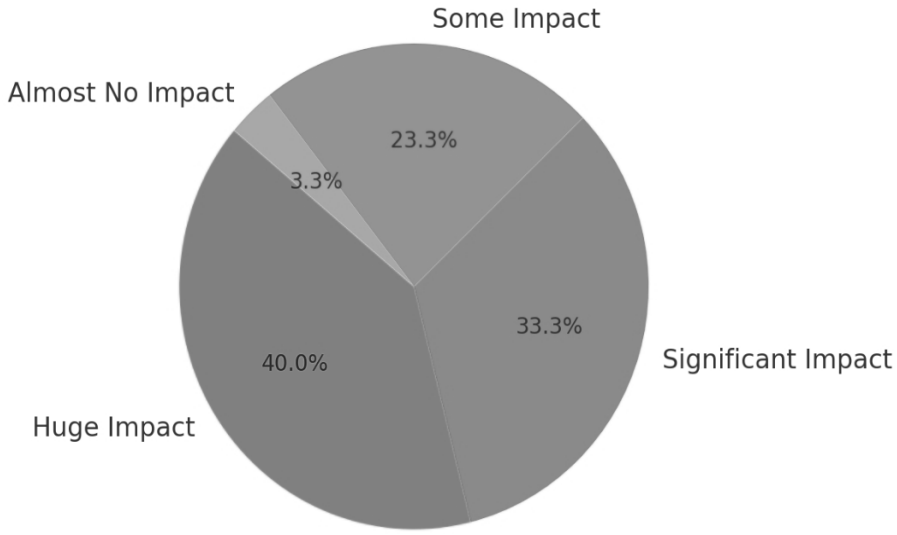
Appendix 2. Key Factors Affecting Engagement



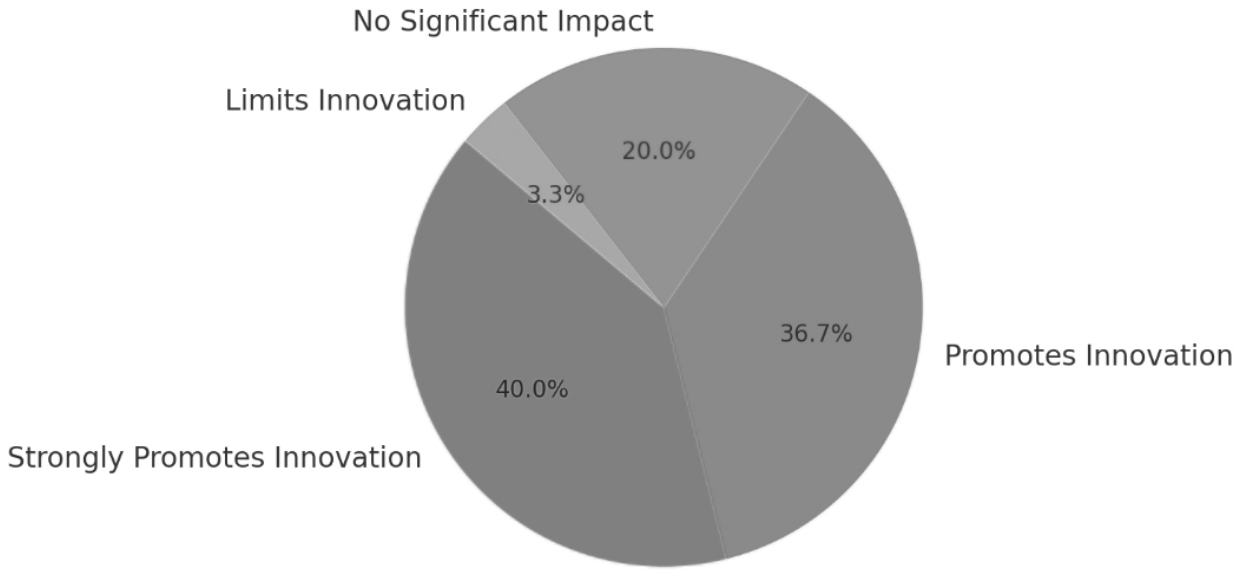
Appendix 3. Key Factors Affecting Autonomy



Appendix 4. The Impact of Engagement on Overall Job Performance



Appendix 5. The Impact of Autonomy on Employee Innovation



Appendix 6. Whether Higher Autonomy Leads to Increased Productivity