Organizational cultural identification and employee engagement: Rethinking organizational performance in creative enterprises

Yangtong Liu[1*], Ibiwani Alisa Binti Hussain[2]
[1,2]Management and Science University, Shah Alam 40100, Malaysia; nancheng1413@163.com (Y.L.)
ibiwani_alisa@msu.edu.my (I.A.B.H.).

Abstract: In the context of the experience economy, cultural and creative enterprises have increasingly become key platforms for the dissemination of social values. Their operations rely heavily on employees' identification with organizational culture and their intrinsic motivation. This study is structured around the conceptual link among organizational cultural identification, employee engagement, and organizational performance. Based on a comprehensive review of existing literature and theoretical integration, it explores the mechanisms through which employee engagement is generated and its influence on organizational performance in cultural and creative enterprises. The findings suggest that the behavioral expression of engagement is rooted in employees' cognitive assimilation and emotional identification with organizational culture. Through pathways such as brand co-creation, innovation activation, and organizational collaboration, employee engagement contributes significantly to the enhancement of non-financial performance. Drawing on the characteristics of cultural and creative organizations, this paper proposes management recommendations such as reshaping the performance evaluation system, aiming to provide both theoretical insight and practical guidance for the sustainable development of culture-oriented enterprises.

1. Introduction

Cultural and creative enterprises have gradually become a vital force in driving social innovation. Unlike traditional manufacturing firms, these enterprises offer not only products but also cultural expressions, and their organizational logic places greater emphasis on the intrinsic motivation and individual expression of creative workers [1]. In this organizational ecosystem, employees are no longer mere executors of organizational goals, they are co-creators and transmitters of cultural values. Consequently, the concept and manifestation of employee engagement should not be equated with standardized or procedural work input [2]. In traditional organizational research, employee engagement is typically viewed as a behavior variable closely linked to performance [3]. However, in cultural and creative enterprises, engagement often extends beyond routine tasks and is characterized by emotional, cultural, and creative dimensions [4]. Employees may join out of passion, stay due to identification, and continually seek alignment between self-fulfillment and cultural mission through their work. This form of "cultural engagement" is not solely driven by institutional incentives , but is rooted in the intrinsic alignment between individual values and organizational culture [5].

The organizational performance of cultural and creative enterprises increasingly reflects non-traditional characteristics. Evaluation systems have shifted from financial metrics to emphasize soft performance dimensions such as brand cultural identification, social influence, and employee creativity [6]. While employee engagement has been widely explored in conventional organizational contexts, research within cultural and creative enterprises remains limited [7]. Existing studies focus

predominantly on external factors like institutional incentives and organizational support, with insufficient attention to internal drivers such as cultural identification, self-expression, and value alignment [8]. Moreover, few theoretical or empirical studies have examined how engagement, shaped by emotional and cultural processes, contributes to non-financial performance outcomes in these enterprises [9].

2. Literature Review

To better illustrate the interrelationships among organizational cultural identification, employee engagement, and non-financial organizational performance, a conceptual theoretical model is proposed based on the reviewed literature, as shown in Figure 1.
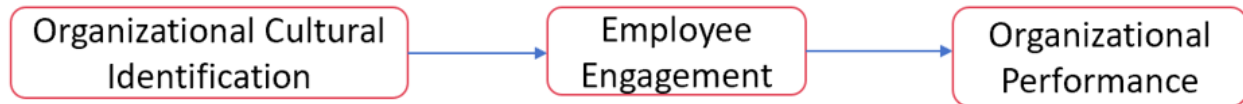

Figure 1.
Theoretical Model.

2.1. Theoretical Origins and Evolution of Employee Engagement

The concept of employee engagement was first introduced by Kahn [10] who defined it as the extent to which employees invest their physical, emotional, and cognitive energies into their roles, thereby achieving a sense of alignment between their work and self-identity. This perspective laid the psychological foundation for subsequent engagement research. Robinson et al conceptualized engagement as an internal state, emphasizing the individual's attentiveness and absorption in work tasks [11]. From a contrasting angle, Demerouti et al viewed engagement as the positive antithesis of burnout, highlighting it as a vigorous and enthusiastic attitude toward work [12]. Building on this, Schaufeli et al defined engagement as a positive, work-related psychological state characterized by three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption [13]. They also developed the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which provided a standardized tool for empirical measurement.

Saks further differentiated between job engagement and organizational engagement, arguing that each is driven by distinct antecedents and leads to different outcomes [14]. In later developments, Schneider and Maecy categorized engagement into psychological engagement, trait engagement, and behavioral engagement, thereby enriching the structural framework of the construct [15].

In China, research on employee engagement emerged later but has grown rapidly. According to Chen emphasized engagement as a form of psychological contract that fosters a win–win relationship between employees and organizations [16]. Wen et al highlighted the direct impact of incentive mechanisms on engagement levels [17]. Most recently, Liu and Guo proposed a localized engagement model integrating personal values, professional spirit, and organizational culture, thereby contributing to the theoretical indigenization of the construct [18].

2.2. The Relationship Between Employee Engagement and Organizational Performance

A substantial body of research has confirmed a significant positive correlation between employee engagement and organizational performance. Rastogi emphasized that engagement reflects a healthy relationship between employees and their organization, which can stimulate employees to exhibit discretionary behaviors beyond their formal job responsibilities [19]. Schaufeli and Bakker [13] by developing a model linking engagement and burnout, demonstrated that highly engaged employees exhibit greater vigor and are less prone to turnover, thereby enhancing organizational stability and operational efficiency [20].

In recent years, scholars have increasingly explored the impact of engagement on non-financial performance outcomes, particularly in sectors such as cultural and creative industries, services, and education. For instance, Zhou, et al. [21] found that inclusive leadership enhances employees'

psychological capital, which in turn improves their engagement levels, ultimately boosting innovation capability and customer satisfaction [21]. Similarly, drawing on self-determination theory, revealed that positive leadership practices that satisfy employees' psychological needs significantly enhance both engagement and team collaboration efficiency [22]. Taken together, employee engagement has been widely recognized as a central variable linking individual behaviors to organizational outcomes. Its influence extends across multiple dimensions, including proactive work behaviors, team synergy, and innovation performance. Therefore, further investigation into the underlying mechanisms and external pathways of engagement not only holds practical implications for enhancing organizational performance but also contributes valuable insights to the development of human resource management theory.

2.3. Organizational Cultural Identification and Employees' Cognitive Foundation

Organizational cultural identification refers to the process by which employees, across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and socialization dimensions, align their values and actions with those of the organization. It is a deep-seated psychological state in which organizational members internalize the cultural ideals, behavioral norms, and value systems promoted by the organization as their own beliefs and behavioral standards [23, 24]. From an organizational behavior perspective, cultural identification is not a static, single-dimensional perception. Rather, it is a dynamic, progressive, and malleable process. Its theoretical foundations can be traced back to Erikson's concept of cultural identity and the social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner, which suggest that individuals gain a sense of belonging, self-location, and social value through identifying with specific social groups or cultural carriers [25, 26]. When applied to organizational contexts, cultural identification can be defined as a long-term process in which employees interact with, understand, absorb, and voluntarily embrace the organization's culture, ultimately forming psychological resonance and behavioral alignment.

According to current mainstream research, organizational cultural identification is generally composed of four key structural dimensions [27, 28]. Cognitive Dimension: This refers to the extent to which employees understand and accept the organization's values, behavioral norms, development philosophy, and regulatory systems. Accurate cognition serves as the foundation for interpreting the core content of the culture and is the starting point for identification. Emotional Dimension: This dimension reflects the sense of belonging, satisfaction, and emotional attachment employees feel as a result of cultural resonance within the organization. It indicates whether employees are emotionally "willing" to embrace the organizational culture, serving as a critical indicator of deepened identification. Behavioral Dimension: This involves the extent to which employees internalize organizational culture into their daily behavioral norms and consciously align their professional conduct with organizational values. This is the "visible" and "actionable" outcome of cultural identification and serves as the core criterion for determining whether identification has been translated into concrete behaviors. Socialization Dimension: This captures the role transition of employees from "peripheral members" to "cultural practitioners" within the organization. It includes adapting to institutional rules, integrating into informal groups, and internalizing cultural symbols and practices, thereby reflecting the developmental and phased nature of cultural identification.

2.4. Cultural Embeddedness and Identity Logic of Employee Engagement

Employee engagement, as a manifestation of employees' psychological state and behavioral investment, is a critical outcome indicator of organizational management practices. Traditionally, engagement has been interpreted primarily from the perspective of work motivation. However, recent studies have increasingly emphasized its cultural embeddedness, highlighting that employees' engagement behaviors are deeply rooted in their identification with and resonance toward organizational culture [13, 18]. Driven by cultural identification, employee engagement tends to develop through three embedded pathways. First, the construction of cultural meaning. Employees redefine the significance and objectives of their work roles through their understanding of the core values emphasized by the organization. When employees perceive their tasks as aligned with the

organization's cultural goals, they are more likely to experience a deep sense of psychological engagement and intrinsic motivation [10]. Second, the stimulation of cultural belonging. Within a strong organizational culture, employees gain emotional support and a sense of social acceptance, which reinforces their belonging to the organization and enhances emotional investment in their work. A strong sense of cultural belonging contributes to the development of satisfaction, loyalty, and enduring emotional bonds, forming the affective foundation of engagement [29]. Third, the internalization of cultural behavioral norms. When employees convert organizational expectations into personal standards of conduct, they are more likely to demonstrate high efficiency, strong accountability, and organizational citizenship behaviors in their daily work [30, 31].

In culturally oriented organizations, the correlation between employees' cultural identification and engagement is significantly stronger than in rule-based organizations [32]. Organizational culture not only provides operational rules and institutional support, but also influences employees' identity and engagement tendencies through value alignment, emotional motivation, and role empowerment. The deeper the cultural embeddedness, the more complete the employees' role experience within the organization, enabling a transformation from external participation to internal commitment.

3. The Impact Pathways of Employee Engagement on the Performance of Cultural and Creative Enterprises

To further explore how employee engagement is shaped within the context of cultural and creative enterprises, this section presents a mechanism framework illustrating the formation process of engagement driven by organizational cultural identification, as depicted in Figure 2.
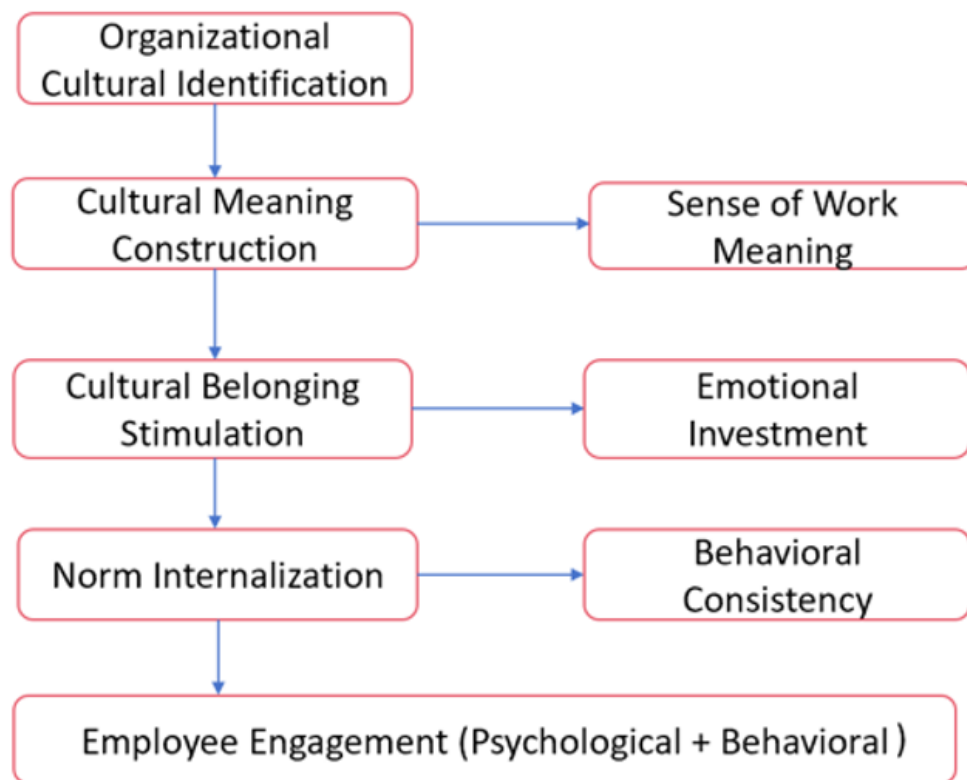

Figure 2.
Mechanisms of Employee Engagement Formation in Cultural and Creative Enterprises.

3.1. Internal Drivers of Brand Identification and Cultural Transmission

In cultural and creative enterprises, a brand is not merely a product identifier. It serves as a condensed expression of the organization's culture and value propositions [33]. The brand carries the enterprise's cultural intentions and conveys a distinct sense of identity to the external environment through visual imagery, product content, and other channels [34]. Employees as vital disseminators and co-creators of brand value, play a critical role in determining whether the brand culture can be effectively internalized and extended. Highly engaged employees tend to possess a stronger sense of cultural identification and intrinsic motivation to communicate brand values [35]. On the basis of a deep understanding of organizational culture, they consciously integrate brand values into their daily tasks and interactions with clients [36]. This voluntary internalization of brand concepts enhances emotional resonance with customers, strengthens the credibility and stickiness of the brand, and contributes to the development and reinforcement of customer loyalty [37]. Research has shown that employees' cultural investment behaviors have a significant impact on improving customer brand perception and loyalty [38]. The brand co-creation mechanism driven by employee engagement enables cultural and creative enterprises to achieve greater market distinctiveness and differentiation [39]. It supports the development of a strong brand recognition system and competitive edge in highly homogenized markets. In doing so, it enhances the social identity and emotional value associated with the enterprise's cultural products [40].

3.2. Mechanisms for Activating Innovation Capability

The core competitiveness of cultural and creative enterprises is rooted in continuous creative output, which largely depends on employees' subjective commitment and identification with the organization. When employees strongly resonate with the organization's culture and mission, they are more likely to exhibit proactivity, exploratory behavior, and critical thinking [41]. This intrinsic motivation encourages them to generate novel ideas and redefine problem boundaries in their daily work, leading to the emergence of original and differentiated creative outcomes [42]. Engaged employees also tend to actively participate in team discussions, idea exchanges, and product development conversations. They do not avoid differences in opinion but rather embrace constructive conflict as a way to stimulate collective intelligence and deepen innovative concepts [43]. Furthermore, during the implementation phase, engaged employees often demonstrate a higher level of commitment and sense of responsibility, which facilitates the transformation of initial ideas into tangible products, services, or content solutions [44]. Research by Slotegraaf and Pauwels shows that higher levels of employee engagement not only increase the number of internal innovation initiatives but also significantly enhance the success rate and market applicability of creative projects [45].

3.3. Enhancing Collaborative Efficiency and Organizational Resilience

Employee engagement is not only a positive psychological state at the individual level, it also serves as a fundamental basis for fostering efficient organizational collaboration and developing systemic resilience [46]. In the context of cultural and creative enterprises, the high complexity and knowledge-intensive nature of creative products often lead to collaboration patterns that involve multiple functions, departments, and even disciplines. This dynamic requires employees to possess not only professional expertise but also a strong willingness to communicate, a spirit of cooperation, and the ability to adapt to evolving tasks and team configurations. Employees with high levels of engagement typically exhibit greater communication initiative and a heightened sense of collective responsibility. They often act as facilitators and connectors within teams, helping to improve information flow and task integration efficiency throughout the collaborative process. According to Bakker et al, such employees play a critical role in enhancing the effectiveness of teamwork by bridging internal gaps and promoting alignment across roles [47]. When facing collaborative conflicts, they are more inclined to adopt constructive mediation strategies, thereby avoiding destructive confrontations and maintaining a cooperative environment and a sense of psychological safety within the organization [48]. More importantly,

engagement behaviors contribute significantly to an organization's capacity to respond to external changes and to withstand operational pressure. In situations where cultural and creative enterprises must react to fast-evolving trends, shifting aesthetic preferences, or fluctuating market demands, highly engaged employees demonstrate an elevated ability to respond to changes in organizational goals. Driven by a strong sense of mission and involvement, they are able to sustain high levels of execution even with limited resources and may actively propose responsive innovations. These capabilities play a vital role in strengthening the adaptability and resilience of the organization in complex and uncertain environments.

4. Management Inspiration and Practical Suggestions

To clarify how employee engagement contributes to organizational performance in cultural and creative enterprises, this section outlines the key pathways through which engagement influences non-financial outcomes, as illustrated in Figure 3.
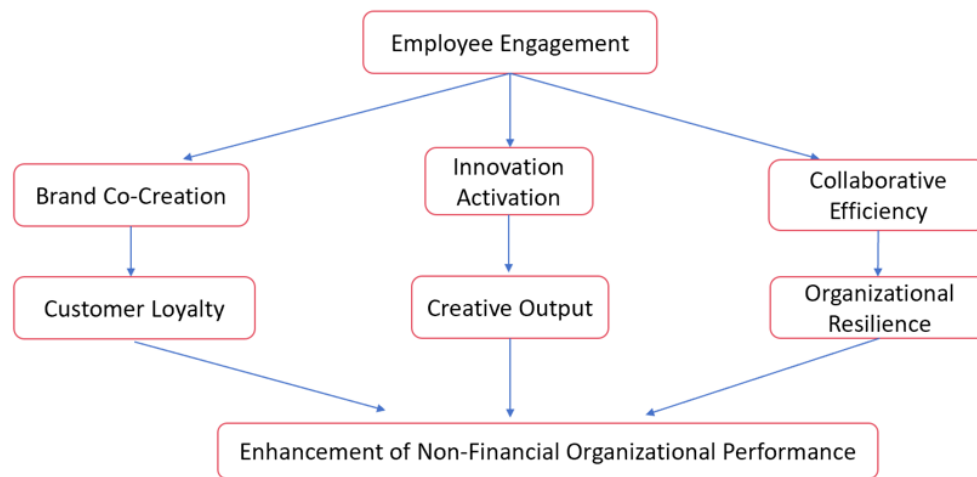

Figure 3.
Pathways of Employee Engagement Influencing Organizational Performance.

4.1. Strengthening Organizational Cultural Identification to Solidify the Psychological Foundation of Employee Engagement

In cultural and creative enterprises, the core competitiveness of the organization is not only reflected in its ability to deliver innovative products and services, but is also deeply rooted in employees' strong identification with organizational culture and their emotional sense of belonging [49]. Cultural identification forms the psychological basis of employee engagement and determines whether employees internalize organizational goals as personal value pursuits. This internalization, in turn, drives sustained proactivity, responsibility, and willingness to invest effort in their work. To foster such identification, managers must begin with strategic cultural construction by cultivating an inclusive, innovative, and individually respectful cultural environment that aligns employees and the organization at the level of shared values. Specifically, the development of cultural identification can be promoted through three main approaches. First, organizations should construct a symbolic system of cultural representation. This includes clearly articulating the organizational vision, mission, core values, and brand identity in order to reinforce employees' sense of identity and cultural belonging [50]. Second, organizations should foster cultural narratives and shared practices that enhance employees' tangible perception and emotional connection with organizational culture [51]. Third, active participation in cultural co-creation should be encouraged. Through internal publications, brand communication, and cultural festivals, employees become active contributors to the formation of organizational culture, thereby

deepening their identification and behavioral alignment. When built on these foundations, organizational culture transforms from a top-down dissemination mechanism into a shared cognitive system co-constructed and dynamically negotiated by employees. This shift enhances the intrinsic motivation behind employee engagement and supports its long-term reinforcement.

4.2. Developing a Multi-Dimensional Motivation System to Activate the Internal Drivers of Employee Engagement

In cultural and creative enterprises, the stimulation of employee engagement depends not only on external incentives but more fundamentally on the activation and fulfillment of internal motivations. As a proactive and enduring work-related state, engagement is shaped by multiple psychological drivers including meaning construction, growth needs, and achievement motivation [52]. Therefore, managers should move beyond traditional reward-and-punishment models to develop a systematic and multi-level motivational mechanism that supports a continuous cycle in which employees are willing to engage, able to engage, and sustained in their engagement. The sense of meaning is a core source of internal motivation for employees in creative roles. Compared to routine tasks, creative work requires employees to resonate with the value of their work [53]. Organizations should actively reinforce the transmission of cultural mission and social purpose by embedding value narratives into work scenarios. This approach helps employees connect their job responsibilities with broader cultural objectives, thereby enhancing their sense of role meaning and professional purpose. Growth motivation is essential for sustaining employee engagement over time [54]. In fast-paced and knowledge-intensive creative industries, employees generally expect continuous professional development and opportunities for self-renewal. Organizations can support this by offering diversified development pathways and flexible learning resources. By constructing a talent development framework that enables both vertical advancement and horizontal expansion, employees are more likely to experience skill growth and a sense of future potential. Achievement motivation reinforces the positive feedback loop of engagement. Engaged employees often seek recognition for their work results and opportunities to demonstrate their value [58]. To support this, organizations should establish a responsive and non-hierarchical evaluation system that promptly identifies employee contributions in areas such as creative output, collaborative performance, or cultural participation. Public recognition, project authorship, and symbolic rewards can serve as effective mechanisms to validate employee achievements and further reinforce their commitment and engagement.

4.3. Focus On Non-Financial Performance Dimensions and Reshape the Performance Evaluation System

In cultural and creative enterprises, the assessment of organizational performance should not be confined to financial outcomes. Unlike traditional enterprises that focus heavily on quantitative metrics such as profit margins and cost control, creative organizations should place greater emphasis on non-financial dimensions including brand value, emotional influence, and sociocultural contribution, all of which possess long-term strategic significance [55]. A revised performance evaluation system should incorporate employees' actual contributions to the dissemination of brand culture. Employees with high levels of engagement often demonstrate strong brand loyalty and a proactive attitude toward cultural communication. They may actively participate in brand building through social media engagement, creative content production, and customer interaction. These behaviors position them as co-creators of brand meaning. Performance assessment should recognize employees' contributions to brand storytelling, cultural content co-creation, and emotional connection with customers in order to encourage active involvement in shaping brand identity [56]. The unique nature of creative work suggests that early-stage involvement and collaborative effort are equally valuable as final results. Creative outcomes typically follow a nonlinear trajectory and depend heavily on team collaboration. Traditional result-oriented evaluation models may overlook employee input in stages such as inspiration generation, conceptual development, and experimental exploration. It is therefore important for organizations to include indicators such as the number of creative proposals, frequency of collaborative

participation, and engagement in experimental tasks. These measures help capture both the breadth and depth of employee engagement in the innovation process. Performance evaluation should also integrate customer perspectives by considering how employee behavior influences customer experience and perceptions of the brand [57]. During the delivery of cultural products and services, employees' emotional commitment and quality of service directly affect customer emotional resonance and word-of-mouth advocacy. By introducing perceptual indicators such as customer feedback on emotional connection and customer referral likelihood, organizations can more accurately assess the soft impact of employee behavior on organizational performance [58]. This creates a meaningful linkage between internal effort and external validation. In the context of cultural and creative organizations, performance management should evolve from a control-oriented approach to a developmental and empowerment-oriented model. Evaluation should not merely serve as a tool for behavioral judgment but should also function as a mechanism for employee growth and potential realization. A comprehensive performance system that integrates multiple dimensions, balances quantitative and qualitative measures, and combines periodic review with real-time feedback allows for a more accurate reflection of the organizational value of employee engagement. At the same time, it helps foster a performance culture that supports innovation and tolerates trial and error, thereby providing a robust institutional and human foundation for the long-term development of cultural and creative enterprises.

5. Research Conclusions and Future Outlook

5.1. Research Conclusions

This study, situated in the context of cultural and creative enterprises, explores the theoretical relationship and structural linkage among organizational cultural identification, employee engagement, and organizational performance. Based on a comprehensive review and analysis of the literature, the study proposes that employee engagement functions as a behavioral extension of cultural identification and serves as an effective mechanism for generating and translating soft performance outcomes in creative organizations. Organizational cultural identification constitutes a central component of the psychological contract between employees and the organization. It is a key cognitive and emotional foundation for the emergence of engagement behaviors. Within cultural and creative enterprises, employees are more likely to align their personal value pursuits with the mission of the organization [63]. This alignment leads to high levels of consistency in cognition, emotion, and behavior. Such identification not only strengthens employees' sense of belonging and loyalty to the organizational culture but also serves as a core source of intrinsic motivation. Employee engagement demonstrates a multidimensional expression through cultural embeddedness and the construction of meaning. It is reflected not only in psychological states such as vigor, dedication, and absorption but also in observable behaviors such as proactive communication, continuous innovation, and collaborative teamwork. The formation of engagement is driven by value alignment, developmental support, and emotional stimulation. This is particularly evident in unstructured and creative work environments where engagement exhibits strong behavioral guidance. The influence of engagement on organizational performance unfolds along three major pathways. These include the transmission of brand identification, the activation of innovation capability, and the optimization of collaborative mechanisms. Engaged employees contribute to the external communication of brand value through voluntary cultural behaviors. They promote ongoing innovation in products and services through exploratory thinking and help construct efficient collaborative systems by actively participating in communication and teamwork. These behaviors generate sustainable performance momentum for the organization. From a practical standpoint, this study offers several management recommendations. These include reinforcing cultural identification, developing a multidimensional motivational system, establishing collaborative co-creation platforms, and restructuring performance evaluation frameworks. Together, these strategies are intended to inform and support human resource practices in cultural and creative enterprises and provide insight for enhancing long-term organizational vitality.

5.2. Research Limitations and Future Outlook

This study is primarily based on literature synthesis and case-driven theoretical reasoning. It lacks systematic empirical validation, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could enhance the robustness of the conclusions by employing in-depth interviews, qualitative coding techniques, or structured survey investigations to empirically test the relationships among key variables. Additionally, cultural and creative enterprises exhibit significant internal heterogeneity, and industry subtypes may shape employee engagement behaviors in distinctive ways. Subsequent studies are encouraged to examine the mechanisms of engagement across various sub-sectors of the cultural and creative industry in order to identify context-specific patterns. Future research could also focus on cross-cultural comparisons of employee engagement under diverse cultural backgrounds. This would enable a deeper understanding of how cultural diversity influences the formation of organizational identification and the realization of organizational performance. With the rise of platform-based and decentralized organizational forms, it is increasingly important to explore how engagement behaviors manifest in these emerging structures and how they challenge conventional management paradigms. Furthermore, incorporating employee engagement into broader frameworks of organizational sustainability and social value assessment may help expand its theoretical scope and practical significance. This line of inquiry holds potential for contributing to the development of social innovation and the promotion of cultural dissemination in a rapidly evolving global context.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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