

Psychological Meaningfulness And Personnel Performance In The Public Service: Revisiting Kahn's Theory Through Employee Disengagement

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Abstract

Employee commitment and motivation are fundamental to the effectiveness of public institutions, yet employee disengagement remains a persistent challenge in Nigeria's local government administration despite several public sector reforms. While previous studies have largely examined employee engagement from motivational and organisational perspectives, limited attention has been given to psychological meaningfulness as an explanation for employee disengagement. This study revisits Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory to examine how the absence of meaningful work contributes to employee disengagement and public service performance. Drawing on evidence from a cross-sectional survey of employees at a Lagos State Local Council, the study synthesises empirical findings on employee recognition, participation in decision-making, and working conditions as key determinants of psychological meaningfulness. The study argues that these organisational practices collectively shape employees' sense of purpose, value, and belonging, thereby influencing their level of engagement and commitment. The findings indicate that employees who perceive their work as meaningful are more committed, psychologically invested in organisational goals, and better positioned to enhance service delivery. In contrast, low psychological meaningfulness is associated with emotional withdrawal, absenteeism, reduced initiative, and poor organisational performance. The study contributes to public administration literature by demonstrating the relevance of Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory as a framework for understanding employee disengagement and recommends psychologically informed human resource practices to improve employee commitment and sustainable public service performance.

Keywords: Psychological Meaningfulness, Employee Disengagement, Public Service Performance,

INTRODUCTION

Public institutions worldwide are under increasing pressure to deliver efficient and responsive services amid rising citizen expectations, fiscal constraints, technological transformation, and evolving workforce dynamics. Although governments continue to invest in administrative reforms, digital transformation, and performance management systems, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the psychological conditions that influence employees' willingness to commit themselves fully to organisational goals. Emerging evidence suggests that organisational effectiveness depends not only on institutional reforms and financial resources but also on employees' perceptions that their work is meaningful, valued, and personally rewarding (Kahn, 1990; Gallup, 2022).

The contemporary workplace has witnessed a shift in employee expectations, with employees increasingly seeking meaningful work, recognition, opportunities for growth, supportive leadership, participation in organisational decision-making, and a sense of belonging (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Gallup, 2022). These expectations are particularly important within public sector organisations, where organisational success depends largely on employees' commitment to public service rather than profit maximisation. Consequently, employees' psychological experiences have become important determinants of organisational commitment, innovation, organisational citizenship behaviour, and service quality (Kahn, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Employee disengagement has consequently emerged as one of the most significant yet least understood challenges confronting organisational performance. Kahn (1990) conceptualised disengagement as the physical, emotional, and cognitive withdrawal of employees from their work roles, resulting in diminished enthusiasm, reduced discretionary effort, absenteeism, minimal collaboration, and declining productivity. Unlike employee turnover, disengaged employees remain physically present but become psychologically detached from organisational goals and responsibilities (Allam, 2017). Global evidence indicates that employee disengagement remains widespread, with Gallup (2018, 2022) reporting that a substantial proportion of employees worldwide are either not engaged or actively disengaged, resulting in reduced productivity, lower innovation, diminished employee wellbeing, and significant economic losses. Similarly, Chamorro-Premuzic (2020) argues that disengagement constitutes one of the greatest hidden organisational costs because psychologically withdrawn employees contribute disproportionately to poor service quality, workplace conflict, and organisational inefficiency.

The Nigerian public service reflects many of these challenges. Despite successive reforms aimed at improving efficiency, accountability, and transparency, public institutions continue to experience persistent problems associated with low employee morale, bureaucratic rigidity, weak performance management systems, and declining service quality. These challenges are particularly evident within local government administration, where political interference, inadequate resources, ineffective human resource practices, and limited institutional autonomy continue to undermine employee commitment and organisational effectiveness. Existing studies have attributed these challenges to factors such as inadequate remuneration, ineffective leadership, poor working conditions, lack of employee recognition, organisational politics, and limited participation in decision-making (Engidaw, 2021; Wushe & Shenje, 2019; Zakaria, Idris, Samah, & Abiddin, 2018). However, these studies have generally examined such organisational variables independently without adequately explaining the psychological mechanisms through which they influence employee behaviour and organisational performance.

This study argues that these organisational practices exert their influence because they shape employees'

experience of psychological meaningfulness. According to Kahn (1990), psychological meaningfulness refers to the perception that one's work is worthwhile and deserving of personal investment. Employees who perceive their work as meaningful are more likely to invest their physical, emotional, and cognitive energies in organisational activities, whereas diminished meaningfulness results in psychological withdrawal and employee disengagement. Consequently, employee recognition, participatory decision-making, supportive working conditions, and fair organisational treatment should be viewed not merely as motivational practices but as organisational experiences that foster meaningful work and sustained employee commitment.

Although Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory has been widely applied within organisational behaviour and human resource management literature (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Truss et al., 2013), its empirical application within Nigerian public administration remains limited. Most Nigerian studies have concentrated on employee motivation, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and engagement, with comparatively little attention devoted to employee disengagement from the perspective of psychological meaningfulness. This study addresses this gap by revisiting Kahn's (1990) theory to explain employee disengagement and public service performance within Nigerian local government administration. Drawing on empirical evidence from Ikorodu Local Government, Lagos State, the study synthesises employee recognition, participation in decision-making, and working conditions within a unified theoretical framework, demonstrating that psychological meaningfulness provides the critical link between organisational practices and sustainable public service performance.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Public service organisations exist primarily to provide efficient, equitable, and responsive services to citizens. However, achieving these objectives depends substantially on employees who are psychologically committed to organisational goals and willing to invest their physical, emotional, and cognitive energies in the performance of their duties. Unfortunately, evidence from both developed and developing countries suggests that employee disengagement has become an increasingly significant threat to organisational effectiveness, with serious consequences for productivity, innovation, employee wellbeing, and service delivery (Gallup, 2018; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2020). Within Nigerian local government administration, manifestations of disengagement—including absenteeism, minimal effort, delayed service delivery, lack of initiative, and emotional detachment—continue to undermine public confidence in grassroots governance.

Although previous studies have identified organisational factors such as inadequate recognition, poor working conditions, ineffective communication, organisational politics, and limited employee participation as predictors of disengagement (Engidaw, 2021; Wushe & Shenje, 2019; Zakaria et al., 2018), most have examined these variables independently without adequately explaining the psychological processes through which they influence employee behaviour. Similarly, Nigerian scholarship has devoted considerably greater attention to employee engagement than to employee disengagement, leaving an important conceptual gap regarding why employees become psychologically detached despite remaining physically present in their organisations.

Moreover, while Kahn's (1990) Psychological Meaningfulness Theory remains one of the most influential explanations of employee engagement and disengagement, its application within Nigerian public administration literature remains limited. Consequently, little empirical attention has been given to understanding whether diminished psychological meaningfulness constitutes the underlying mechanism through which organisational experiences influence public service performance in local government institutions. This limitation restricts both theoretical advancement and the development of effective human resource interventions capable of addressing disengagement beyond traditional motivational approaches.

Against this backdrop, this study revisits Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory to examine employee disengagement as a psychological rather than merely behavioural phenomenon. By synthesising evidence from employee recognition, participation in decision-making, and working conditions within Ikorodu Local Government, Lagos State, the paper seeks to explain how the experience of meaningful work influences employee commitment and public service performance. In doing so, it extends existing knowledge by providing a theoretically grounded interpretation of employee disengagement and offering practical insights for strengthening organisational performance through psychologically informed human resource management.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Concept of Psychological Meaningfulness

Psychological meaningfulness has increasingly become one of the most influential constructs in organisational behaviour, human resource management, and public administration because it explains why employees choose to invest themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in their work. While traditional approaches to employee motivation have focused primarily on financial rewards, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment, contemporary scholarship argues that employees are more likely to demonstrate exceptional performance when they perceive their work as personally valuable and worthwhile. This psychological state enables employees to connect their individual aspirations with organisational goals, thereby creating a deeper sense of purpose and ownership over their responsibilities.

The concept gained prominence through the pioneering work of **Kahn (1990)**, who introduced psychological meaningfulness as one of the three psychological conditions necessary for personal engagement at work, alongside psychological safety and psychological availability. According to Kahn (1990), psychological meaningfulness refers to an individual's perception that investing oneself in work roles yields worthwhile returns in terms of self-esteem, personal growth, recognition, and a sense of accomplishment. Employees who experience meaningfulness believe that their contributions matter to the organisation, thereby encouraging them to devote greater physical effort, emotional energy, and intellectual resources to role performance.

Kahn's conceptualisation represented a significant departure from earlier motivational theories because it emphasised the subjective interpretation employees attach to their work rather than external incentives alone. Rather than viewing motivation as merely a consequence of rewards or supervision, Kahn argued that employees become fully engaged when they perceive that their work provides intrinsic value and enables them to express their authentic selves. Conversely, when organisational practices undermine employees' sense of worth or significance, individuals gradually withdraw psychologically from their work roles, giving rise to disengagement.

Subsequent studies have reinforced Kahn's proposition by demonstrating that meaningful work constitutes a fundamental psychological need influencing employee attitudes and organisational outcomes. Bakker and Demerouti (2006) contend that employees who perceive meaning in their work demonstrate greater resilience, enthusiasm, and persistence, particularly under demanding work conditions. Similarly, Deci and Ryan (2000), through Self-Determination Theory, argue that individuals derive intrinsic motivation when organisational environments satisfy their psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. These psychological experiences collectively strengthen employees' perception that their work is worthwhile and socially valuable.

Within contemporary organisations, psychological meaningfulness is influenced by several workplace experiences. Employee recognition, supportive leadership, equitable treatment, participation in

organisational decision-making, opportunities for learning and development, role clarity, and favourable working conditions all contribute to employees' perception that they are valued members of the organisation (Gallup, 2021; Engidaw, 2021). Conversely, organisational injustice, poor communication, exclusion from important decisions, inadequate recognition, excessive bureaucracy, and poor leadership diminish employees' sense of meaning, thereby increasing psychological withdrawal and disengagement.

In public sector organisations, psychological meaningfulness assumes even greater significance because employees are expected to pursue broader societal objectives beyond financial returns. Public servants frequently derive motivation from contributing to community development, social justice, and national development. Consequently, organisational practices that reinforce employees' perception of serving the public interest strengthen meaningfulness, whereas persistent political interference, limited institutional autonomy, inadequate recognition, and poor management practices diminish employees' psychological attachment to public service.

Within Nigerian local government administration, psychological meaningfulness has received relatively limited scholarly attention despite its potential to explain persistent organisational challenges. Existing studies have predominantly examined employee motivation, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, or engagement without adequately exploring whether employees perceive their work as meaningful. Yet, employees who continually experience neglect, limited opportunities for participation, poor recognition, and inadequate working environments may gradually lose their sense of purpose irrespective of their technical competence or years of experience. Consequently, psychological meaningfulness provides an appropriate theoretical lens for understanding why some public employees remain physically present at work while becoming emotionally and cognitively detached from their organisational responsibilities.

2.2 Employee Disengagement

Employee disengagement has emerged as one of the most pressing human resource challenges confronting organisations globally. Unlike absenteeism or labour turnover, disengagement describes a psychological condition in which employees remain physically present within the organisation but become emotionally, cognitively, and behaviourally detached from their work. Such employees perform assigned duties mechanically, demonstrate limited enthusiasm, avoid discretionary effort, and rarely contribute innovative ideas capable of improving organisational effectiveness.

Kahn (1990) conceptualised disengagement as the simultaneous withdrawal and defence of one's preferred self during role performance. According to him, disengaged employees uncouple themselves from work roles by withholding physical effort, emotional commitment, and cognitive attention necessary for effective performance. Rather than expressing their authentic selves, disengaged workers perform organisational roles passively, thereby limiting creativity, collaboration, and initiative.

Building upon Kahn's work, Allam (2017) describes employee disengagement as a condition in which workers demonstrate little enthusiasm, commitment, or interest in organisational activities. Similarly, Bakker and Demerouti (2006) define disengagement as a negative work-related psychological state characterised by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and diminished professional efficacy. These conceptualisations suggest that disengagement extends beyond observable behaviour to encompass employees' internal psychological experiences.

Global empirical evidence indicates that disengagement has become increasingly widespread across both public and private organisations. Gallup (2018) estimated that approximately 85 per cent of employees worldwide are either not engaged or actively disengaged, resulting in significant productivity losses across national economies. Subsequent reports by Gallup (2022) indicate that workplace stress, poor managerial

communication, unfair treatment, excessive workload, and inadequate organisational support continue to undermine employee engagement globally. Chamorro-Premuzic (2020) similarly argues that disengagement represents one of the most costly yet least visible organisational challenges because disengaged employees negatively influence colleagues, customer experiences, and organisational performance.

Several antecedents of employee disengagement have been identified within the literature. Aslam, Muqadas, Imran and Rahman (2018) identified organisational injustice, workplace politics, excessive workload, and poor communication as major contributors to disengagement. Other scholars have emphasised ineffective leadership, limited career advancement opportunities, inadequate recognition, insufficient organisational support, and poor working conditions as significant predictors of psychological withdrawal (Engidaw, 2021; Wushe & Shenje, 2019). These organisational deficiencies weaken employees' perception that their work is valued, thereby reducing commitment and increasing withdrawal behaviours.

Within Nigerian public administration, manifestations of disengagement include absenteeism, lateness, reduced initiative, slow work tempo, indifference towards citizens, bureaucratic rigidity, poor customer service, and reluctance to assume additional responsibilities. Earlier observations regarding local government administration suggest that many employees perform their duties primarily because of economic necessity rather than intrinsic commitment to public service (Armstrong, 2006; David, 2015). Such behavioural patterns have contributed to declining public confidence in grassroots governance and continue to undermine service delivery.

Importantly, this study departs from earlier literature by arguing that employee disengagement should not merely be viewed as the opposite of engagement. Rather, disengagement represents the cumulative outcome of diminished psychological meaningfulness arising from employees' experiences within the organisation. Thus, organisational interventions designed to improve engagement should focus less on superficial motivational practices and more on creating meaningful work experiences capable of strengthening employees' psychological investment in organisational objectives.

2.3 Public Service Performance

Public service performance refers to the extent to which public institutions effectively utilise available human, financial, and material resources to achieve governmental objectives and satisfy citizens' expectations. Within local government administration, performance is reflected in efficient service delivery, responsiveness to community needs, accountability, transparency, timely implementation of policies, and prudent management of public resources.

Unlike private organisations where profitability serves as the dominant performance indicator, public sector performance is evaluated using broader social outcomes including service quality, citizen satisfaction, equity, effectiveness, responsiveness, and institutional legitimacy. Consequently, employee performance constitutes one of the most important determinants of organisational performance because public services are predominantly delivered through human interactions.

Delic (2017) argues that organisational performance reflects an institution's ability to achieve predetermined goals under changing environmental conditions. Similarly, Mastrangelo (2019) maintains that organisational effectiveness depends substantially on employee behaviour, leadership quality, and organisational culture. Within public administration, these factors collectively determine whether government institutions successfully fulfil their constitutional responsibilities.

However, public organisations frequently encounter structural and managerial constraints capable of

limiting employee performance. Political interference, bureaucratic procedures, inadequate funding, weak accountability mechanisms, poor human resource management, and insufficient employee development opportunities continue to affect organisational effectiveness, particularly in developing countries. In Nigerian local government administration, these institutional constraints have contributed to declining employee morale, reduced productivity, and widespread public dissatisfaction regarding service delivery.

Several scholars have argued that improvements in organisational performance require more than administrative reforms or technological innovations. Rather, sustainable performance depends on creating organisational environments where employees willingly contribute beyond prescribed job requirements. Engaged employees consistently demonstrate higher productivity, greater organisational citizenship behaviour, stronger commitment, improved problem-solving capacity, and better service quality than disengaged employees (Gallup, 2021; Engidaw, 2021). Consequently, psychological experiences at work constitute an important determinant of public service performance.

This study therefore conceptualises public service performance not merely as the achievement of organisational targets but as an outcome of employees' psychological investment in their work. When employees perceive their roles as meaningful and experience supportive organisational environments, they are more likely to demonstrate commitment, innovation, accountability, and responsiveness necessary for effective public service delivery.

2.4 Linkages among Psychological Meaningfulness, Employee Disengagement and Public Service Performance

The literature suggests a sequential relationship among psychological meaningfulness, employee disengagement, and public service performance. Psychological meaningfulness constitutes the underlying psychological condition through which organisational experiences influence employee behaviour. Organisational practices such as recognition, participation in decision-making, supportive leadership, equitable treatment, and favourable working conditions enhance employees' perception that their work is valuable and appreciated (Kahn, 1990; Gallup, 2021). This perception encourages employees to invest themselves fully in organisational activities, thereby reducing the likelihood of disengagement.

Conversely, organisational environments characterised by poor recognition, limited participation, ineffective communication, political interference, and unfavourable working conditions diminish employees' psychological meaningfulness. As employees gradually lose their sense of purpose and organisational value, emotional withdrawal, reduced commitment, absenteeism, minimal discretionary effort, and other manifestations of disengagement become increasingly evident. These behaviours subsequently undermine organisational effectiveness through declining productivity, reduced innovation, poor service quality, and diminished public trust.

Accordingly, this study argues that employee disengagement serves as the behavioural manifestation of diminished psychological meaningfulness, while public service performance represents the organisational consequence of employees' psychological experiences at work. Revisiting Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory therefore provides a more comprehensive explanation of employee behaviour within Nigerian local government administration than approaches that focus exclusively on motivation, rewards, or job satisfaction. It is this theoretical proposition that underpins the subsequent discussion of Kahn's theory and the empirical evidence examined in this study.

2.5 Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory

This study is anchored on Kahn's (1990) Theory of Psychological Meaningfulness, which remains one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for explaining employee engagement and disengagement in

organisational settings. Kahn introduced the theory in his seminal work, *Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work*, arguing that employees do not automatically invest themselves in their work roles. Rather, their level of engagement depends on three interrelated psychological conditions: psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability. Of these conditions, psychological meaningfulness is considered the most fundamental because it determines whether employees perceive their work as sufficiently valuable to warrant personal investment.

According to Kahn (1990), psychological meaningfulness refers to an individual's perception that work is worthwhile and provides a worthwhile return on investments of physical, emotional, and cognitive energies. Employees who perceive their roles as meaningful are more likely to express their authentic selves during task performance, demonstrate initiative, contribute innovative ideas, and develop stronger attachments to organisational goals. Conversely, when employees perceive little value or significance in their work experiences, they progressively withdraw from organisational roles, resulting in psychological disengagement.

Kahn identified several organisational factors that influence employees' experience of meaningfulness. These include task characteristics, role clarity, opportunities for personal growth, supportive interpersonal relationships, recognition, autonomy, and the perceived significance of one's contribution to organisational objectives. Employees derive meaning when they believe that their work is appreciated, their opinions are respected, and their contributions make a positive difference to the organisation. Consequently, meaningfulness is not solely determined by the nature of the job itself but also by the quality of organisational experiences surrounding work performance.

The assumptions of Kahn's theory resonate strongly with contemporary human resource management literature. Organisational practices such as employee recognition, participative decision-making, equitable treatment, leadership support, learning opportunities, and conducive working environments have consistently been associated with higher levels of employee engagement and organisational commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Gallup, 2022; Engidaw, 2021). These practices enhance employees' psychological meaningfulness because they reinforce the perception that individuals are valued organisational members whose efforts contribute to broader institutional goals.

Within public sector organisations, psychological meaningfulness assumes additional significance because public servants often derive satisfaction from contributing to societal development rather than financial gain alone. Public service motivation literature similarly argues that employees are motivated when organisational environments reinforce values such as service to society, fairness, accountability, and collective wellbeing. Thus, meaningful work within public institutions extends beyond individual achievement to include the perceived impact of one's work on citizens and communities.

Despite its relevance, Kahn's theory has received limited empirical application within Nigerian public administration research. Most studies have adopted motivation theories, organisational commitment theory, social exchange theory, or Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory to explain employee performance, while comparatively fewer studies have explored how employees' perceptions of meaningful work influence disengagement within local government administration. Consequently, important psychological mechanisms underlying employee behaviour remain insufficiently examined.

The present study extends Kahn's theory by arguing that organisational variables examined in the original dissertation—employee recognition, employee involvement in decision-making, and working conditions—should not merely be viewed as independent human resource practices but as antecedents of psychological meaningfulness. Recognition communicates appreciation and reinforces employees' sense of

value. Participation in decision-making strengthens feelings of ownership and organisational relevance. Similarly, supportive working conditions signal organisational concern for employee wellbeing. Collectively, these experiences shape employees' perception that their work matters, thereby influencing the extent to which they remain psychologically engaged or become disengaged.

Accordingly, this study conceptualises psychological meaningfulness as the central explanatory mechanism linking organisational experiences to employee disengagement and ultimately to public service performance. By revisiting Kahn's theory within the Nigerian local government context, the paper contributes to both organisational behaviour and public administration literature by demonstrating that employee disengagement represents not merely a behavioural problem but a consequence of diminished psychological meaning in the workplace.

2.6 Empirical Review

The relationship between psychological experiences at work and organisational performance has received increasing scholarly attention across different organisational contexts. Although relatively few studies have examined psychological meaningfulness directly, substantial empirical evidence supports Kahn's proposition that employees become more engaged when organisational environments foster recognition, participation, fairness, supportive leadership, and favourable working conditions.

Gallup's (2018; 2022) global workplace surveys consistently demonstrate that engaged employees outperform their disengaged counterparts across various organisational outcomes, including productivity, customer satisfaction, profitability, innovation, and employee retention. Organisations characterised by high employee engagement report lower absenteeism, reduced workplace accidents, and stronger organisational commitment. Conversely, disengaged employees contribute significantly to organisational inefficiency and declining performance. While Gallup's findings provide strong evidence regarding engagement, they pay relatively limited attention to the underlying psychological conditions responsible for engagement or disengagement.

Engidaw (2021), in a study of public sector employees, found that employee recognition, supervisory support, career development opportunities, and participation in organisational activities significantly influenced employee engagement and organisational commitment. The study concluded that employees who perceive themselves as respected and appreciated are more willing to contribute beyond formal job requirements. Although psychological meaningfulness was not explicitly examined, the findings support Kahn's assertion that organisational experiences shape employees' willingness to invest themselves in work roles.

Similarly, Wushe and Shenje (2019) investigated determinants of employee engagement within public organisations and identified leadership quality, communication effectiveness, organisational justice, and employee participation as important predictors of organisational commitment and performance. Their findings emphasised that employees become disengaged when they perceive organisational decisions as unfair or when management fails to acknowledge their contributions. These observations further reinforce the relevance of psychological meaningfulness in explaining employee behaviour.

Zakaria et al. (2018) examined organisational factors influencing employee engagement and found that meaningful work, supportive leadership, and opportunities for participation significantly enhanced employee commitment and discretionary effort. Employees who perceived their work as meaningful demonstrated greater enthusiasm, collaboration, and willingness to contribute innovative solutions to organisational challenges. Conversely, employees experiencing low meaningfulness reported emotional exhaustion and declining organisational attachment.

Within the Nigerian context, studies on employee engagement have predominantly focused on motivational factors, organisational commitment, leadership style, and job satisfaction. For example, David (2015) argued that ineffective leadership, inadequate recognition, and poor working conditions contributed significantly to declining employee commitment within public institutions. Similarly, Armstrong (2006) emphasised that effective human resource management requires organisational practices capable of satisfying employees' psychological as well as material needs. While these studies provide useful insights into organisational behaviour, they stop short of explicitly explaining how these practices influence employees' psychological interpretation of work.

This article established that employee recognition, employee involvement in decision-making, and favourable working conditions significantly influenced employee disengagement and organisational performance among employees of Ikorodu Local Government, Lagos State. The published article subsequently demonstrated the significant influence of employee recognition on employee disengagement and performance. However, both studies primarily interpreted these findings from a human resource management perspective without explicitly examining psychological meaningfulness as the underlying explanatory mechanism.

The present paper therefore synthesises these empirical findings by proposing that recognition, participation, and working conditions derive their influence because they strengthen employees' perception that their work is valued and worthwhile. In this regard, psychological meaningfulness functions as the latent mechanism through which organisational experiences translate into behavioural outcomes such as engagement, disengagement, and ultimately public service performance.

Despite the growing body of literature on employee engagement and organisational performance, several conceptual and empirical gaps remain evident.

Despite the growing body of literature on employee engagement and organisational performance, significant conceptual and empirical gaps remain. Existing studies have focused predominantly on employee engagement, with comparatively little attention given to employee disengagement as a distinct psychological and behavioural phenomenon. Consequently, disengagement has often been treated merely as the opposite of engagement, overlooking its unique antecedents and implications for organisational performance. Furthermore, previous research has largely examined organisational factors such as employee recognition, participation in decision-making, leadership, and working conditions as independent predictors of performance without adequately explaining the underlying psychological mechanisms through which these practices shape employee behaviour.

In the Nigerian public sector, empirical application of Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory remains limited despite its relevance for understanding employee engagement and disengagement. Most studies have concentrated on motivation, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and leadership effectiveness, while paying insufficient attention to employees' subjective experience of meaningful work. Moreover, the published article derived from the parent dissertation examined employee recognition as a predictor of disengagement and performance but did not integrate the broader organisational variables investigated in the dissertation within a unified theoretical framework. This study addresses these gaps by synthesising employee recognition, participation in decision-making, and working conditions through the lens of psychological meaningfulness, thereby providing a more comprehensive explanation of employee disengagement and public service performance in Nigerian local government administration.

Drawing from Kahn's (1990) Psychological Meaningfulness Theory and the reviewed empirical literature, this study proposes that psychological meaningfulness serves as the principal psychological mechanism through which organisational experiences influence employee behaviour and organisational performance.

Rather than conceptualising employee recognition, participation in decision-making, and working conditions as independent human resource interventions, the study views them as organisational antecedents that collectively shape employees' perceptions of meaning, value, and purpose within the workplace.

Specifically, organisational practices that communicate appreciation, encourage participation, promote fairness, and provide supportive working environments strengthen employees' psychological meaningfulness. Enhanced meaningfulness increases employees' willingness to invest their cognitive, emotional, and physical energies in organisational activities, thereby reducing disengagement and improving public service performance. Conversely, organisational environments characterised by poor recognition, exclusion, unfavourable working conditions, and weak managerial support diminish psychological meaningfulness, resulting in emotional withdrawal, reduced commitment, and declining organisational effectiveness.

This conceptual synthesis provides the theoretical foundation for the empirical investigation reported in the subsequent methodology section. It positions psychological meaningfulness not merely as another organisational variable but as the explanatory pathway linking workplace experiences to employee disengagement and public service performance within Nigerian local government administration. This perspective enables a more integrated understanding of employee behaviour and offers practical guidance for designing human resource interventions that foster meaningful work and sustainable organisational performance.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design to examine how psychological meaningfulness influences public service performance through employee disengagement in Ikorodu Local Government, Lagos State. The paper reinterprets evidence from related study earlier carried out at another council in Lagos State using Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory. Data were collected through a structured five-point Likert questionnaire administered to employees across departments. Of a staff population of about 700 staff (infinite), Cochran (1977) Formula for an Infinite Population was adopted to determine the sample size appropriate for this study

Infinite Population Formula $n_0 \quad n = n_0 / [1 + (n_0 - 1)/N]$

where:

n_0 = sample size for an infinite population.

N = finite population size.

($N = 668$)

Therefore,

$$n_0 = (1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5) / (0.05^2) = 384.16$$

$$n = 384.16 / [1 + (384.16 - 1)/668] = 244.13 \text{ approximately } 244 \text{ respondents}$$

A total of 244 questionnaires were distributed. Of the 244 distributed, 235 were returned and found usable, representing a response rate of approximately 96%. A simple random sampling approach was adopted. Instrument validity was established through expert review, while reliability was confirmed before field administration. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests in SPSS. This article synthesises employee recognition, employee involvement in decision-making, and working conditions as complementary dimensions that shape employees' psychological meaningfulness. The statistical evidence

is therefore interpreted as explaining how meaningful work experiences reduce disengagement and enhance public service performance.

Results and Discussion

Dimension	Chi-square	df	p-value	Interpretation
Employee Recognition	264.05	16	<0.05	Significant contributor to psychological meaningfulness
Decision-making	737.35	16	<0.05	Strong predictor of commitment and meaningfulness
Working Conditions	1267.73	16	<0.05	Strongest predictor of meaningfulness and performance

The findings demonstrate that all three organisational dimensions significantly influenced employee behaviour. Viewed through Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory, these variables are not isolated HR practices but organisational experiences that communicate value, respect, inclusion and organisational support. Employee recognition reinforces employees' perception that their contributions matter, encouraging greater emotional and cognitive investment in work. Participation in decision-making strengthens ownership, trust and responsibility, thereby reducing psychological withdrawal. Supportive working conditions provide the resources and environment required for employees to remain psychologically available and committed to organisational goals. The Chi-square results indicate statistically significant relationships for each dimension ($p < 0.05$), with working conditions recording the largest Chi-square statistic, suggesting that the quality of the work environment exerts the strongest influence on employees' perception of meaningful work within the study context. Although recognition and participation remain important, employees are unlikely to sustain engagement where the workplace fails to provide adequate support, fairness and conditions necessary for effective performance. These findings align with Kahn's proposition that meaningfulness is created when employees perceive worthwhile returns from investing themselves in work roles. They also support earlier studies cited in the dissertation, including Gallup, Engidaw, Wushe and Shenje, and Zakaria et al., which emphasise recognition, participation and supportive organisational environments as drivers of engagement. However, the present paper extends those studies by arguing that these organisational practices influence performance because they first shape psychological meaningfulness. Accordingly, employee disengagement is interpreted as the behavioural manifestation of diminished meaningfulness rather than merely the absence of motivation. For local government administration, the implication is that improving public service performance requires HR interventions that strengthen employees' sense of purpose and value. Recognition systems, participatory management and conducive working conditions should therefore be implemented as integrated mechanisms for creating meaningful work experiences capable of sustaining commitment, reducing disengagement and improving service delivery.

Theoretical Implications

This study advances the literature on employee engagement and public sector performance by extending the application of Kahn's (1990) Psychological Meaningfulness Theory to the Nigerian local government context. While previous studies have predominantly examined employee recognition, participation in decision-making, and working conditions as independent determinants of employee performance, the present study demonstrates that these organisational practices collectively contribute to employees' experience of psychological meaningfulness, which ultimately influences employee disengagement and public service performance. This theoretical reinterpretation shifts the discourse from viewing engagement as merely a product of human resource interventions to understanding it as a psychological response to meaningful organisational experiences.

The study further contributes to public administration literature by positioning psychological meaningfulness as an explanatory mechanism through which organisational practices influence employee behaviour. Rather than treating disengagement as simply the absence of engagement, the findings suggest that disengagement represents a gradual psychological withdrawal arising from diminished perceptions of value, purpose, and organisational relevance. Consequently, the study enriches existing engagement literature by integrating organisational behaviour with public sector management and providing empirical support for Kahn's proposition that meaningful work encourages employees to invest their physical, emotional, and cognitive energies in organisational roles.

Furthermore, the study expands the applicability of Kahn's framework beyond private-sector organisations where it has been extensively validated. By demonstrating its relevance within Nigerian local government administration, the paper establishes psychological meaningfulness as an important theoretical construct for explaining employee behaviour in resource-constrained public institutions. This contributes to the growing body of knowledge advocating psychologically informed approaches to public human resource management.

Practical Implications

The findings have important implications for human resource managers, local government administrators, policymakers, and public sector leaders seeking to improve employee commitment and organisational performance.

First, local government management should recognise that employee engagement extends beyond financial incentives. Although remuneration remains important, employees are more likely to remain committed when organisational practices foster recognition, inclusion, fairness, and respect. Managers should therefore institutionalise structured employee recognition programmes that acknowledge both individual and team contributions to organisational success.

Second, the study highlights the importance of participatory management in strengthening employees' psychological attachment to organisational goals. Employees who participate in organisational decision-making are more likely to perceive themselves as valued organisational members, thereby reducing psychological withdrawal and improving commitment. Local government managers should therefore promote consultative leadership, regular staff forums, and participatory policy implementation.

Third, improving working conditions should be viewed as a strategic investment rather than merely an administrative obligation. Safe work environments, adequate resources, supportive supervision, and opportunities for professional development contribute significantly to employees' perception of meaningful work and enhance organisational effectiveness.

Finally, public sector reforms should incorporate psychological dimensions of employee management into

existing performance improvement initiatives. Current reform efforts frequently emphasise administrative restructuring, financial accountability, and technological innovation while paying comparatively little attention to employees' psychological experiences. Integrating psychological meaningfulness into human resource policies may strengthen employee wellbeing, reduce disengagement, and improve the quality of public service delivery.

CONCLUSION

This study revisited Kahn's Psychological Meaningfulness Theory to explain employee disengagement and public service performance within Nigerian local government administration. Using empirical evidence derived from Ikorodu Local Government, Lagos State, the study demonstrated that employee recognition, involvement in decision-making, and favourable working conditions collectively enhance employees' psychological meaningfulness, thereby reducing disengagement and strengthening organisational performance.

Unlike previous studies that examined these organisational variables independently, this paper argues that their influence is best understood through employees' subjective perception of meaningful work. Employees who believe that their contributions are recognised, their opinions respected, and their work environment supportive are more likely to invest themselves fully in organisational activities. Conversely, diminished psychological meaningfulness manifests as disengagement characterised by emotional withdrawal, reduced commitment, limited initiative, and declining productivity.

The study therefore concludes that improving public service performance requires more than administrative reforms or financial incentives. Sustainable organisational effectiveness depends on creating organisational environments where employees experience purpose, value, and belonging. Consequently, psychologically informed human resource management should become an integral component of public sector reform strategies aimed at strengthening service delivery and institutional performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, local government authorities should adopt a more strategic and employee-centred approach to human resource management by institutionalising policies and practices that enhance employees' psychological meaningfulness. In particular, structured employee recognition programmes should be established to consistently acknowledge outstanding performance and reinforce employees' perception that their contributions are valued. Such initiatives should be complemented by participatory management practices that actively involve employees in policy formulation, operational planning, and organisational problem-solving. By fostering a culture of recognition, inclusion, and shared responsibility, local government administrations can strengthen employees' sense of ownership, commitment, and psychological attachment to organisational goals, thereby reducing disengagement and improving public service performance.

Furthermore, management should prioritise the creation of supportive work environments that enable employees to perform effectively and derive greater meaning from their work. This requires continuous improvement in working conditions through the provision of adequate work resources, supportive supervision, safe and healthy workplaces, and regular opportunities for professional development. In addition, human resource policies should move beyond traditional performance indicators by incorporating psychological meaningfulness as a strategic dimension of employee performance management. Recognising employees' need for purpose, value, and belonging will enable organisations to design more holistic interventions that enhance engagement, motivation, and service delivery. Consequently, public sector reform initiatives should integrate psychologically informed management practices alongside

ongoing administrative, institutional, and technological reforms to achieve sustainable organisational effectiveness.

Finally, there is a need for further empirical research to deepen understanding of psychological meaningfulness within the Nigerian public sector. Future studies should examine this construct across different tiers of government and other public institutions to determine the extent to which the findings of this study are transferable to diverse organisational contexts. Researchers are also encouraged to employ longitudinal and mixed-method research designs to capture changes in employees' psychological experiences over time and provide richer explanations of the relationships between psychological meaningfulness, employee disengagement, and public service performance. Such studies will contribute to theory development while providing stronger evidence to inform policy and human resource practice in the public sector.

Contribution To Knowledge And Practice Of Administration

This paper is significant because it offers a clear theoretical contribution rather than simply reporting empirical relationships. Instead of examining recognition, participation, and working conditions independently, it explains why these practices matter by positioning psychological meaningfulness as the mechanism linking human resource practices to employee disengagement and public service performance. This framing substantially improves the paper's originality and scholarly value.

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