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What Makes Social Work Meaningful? Evidence for a Curvilinear Relationship of Meaningful Work on Work Engagement with Psychological Capital as the Moderator

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the conservation of resources theory, this study examines the curvilinear relationship between social workers' meaningful work and work engagement. Data gathered from 223 social workers reveal that the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement showed a U-shaped curve when psychological capital is low. In contrast, this relationship showed an inverted U-shaped curve when psychological capital is high. Our study makes significant contributions to the literature in the following ways. First and foremost, this is the first paper that provides an established base to validate the momentary and changing nature of meaningful work empirically. Second, we further addressed how the fluctuating nature of meaningful work can be addressed through individuals' demographic variables of psychological capital. Finally, our results provide managerial interventions that support businesses in advancing the understanding of psychological processes in contexts related to the broad area of work and in organizations.

KEYWORDS

Curvilinear relationship; meaningful work; psychological capital; social worker; work engagement

PRACTICE POINTS

- Meaningful work enhances work engagement. Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) should provide a safe space where social workers can share their victories, perspectives, and frustrations.
- NPOs should provide ample support to employees and ensure they fit well into the new social work environment.
- Given the malleable characteristics of PsyCap, NPOs can offer interventions in the form of training to increase social workers' sense of hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism.
- The curvilinear effect of PsyCap on the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement shows that NPOs should also design pathways to engage social workers with high PsyCap constantly.

Introduction

Meaningful work is an area of growing importance as part of employment. It has already been formed to meet employees' need for purposeful working life. Throughout history, work has played a dominant role in human life. Although it has been seen as burdensome and unpleasant, work is still critical for maintaining survivability and lifestyle (Shepherdson, 1984). However, work for some individuals is more than survival. The classic story of a NASA janitor seeing his role as putting someone on the moon demonstrates that people can find identity and purpose in their work (Carton, 2017). For these individuals, work is not just about putting food on the table or paying bills; it is about addressing a

more fundamental purpose of self-actualization and finding the meaning of one's existence (Chalofsky, 2003). As pointed out in subsequent sections, there has not been a single definition of meaningful work. By and large, different definitions by scholars such as Pratt and Ashforth (2003) have generally concluded that meaningful work is an individual experience that derives from helping others, which gives a sense of ownership and identity, but yet is episodic.

For social workers, meaningful work plays an even more critical role. The altruistic mission of the profession, where social workers support individuals and their families through difficult times and ensure that vulnerable people are safeguarded from harm, is vital in attracting them to join the profession (Ho & Chan, 2022). Social workers work in various settings within relevant legislation and procedures. They can work in homes or schools, hospitals, or on the premises of other public sector and voluntary organizations. Yet, regardless of their work venue, they have a similar goal – helping improve people's outcomes. To achieve this goal, they play the role of a broker, an advocate, a case manager, an educator, a facilitator, an organizer, and a manager.

Over the last decade, a stream of organizational studies appeared focusing on the positive outcomes of meaningful work by delineating individual and organizational level benefits. For instance, literature has demonstrated strong associations between meaningful work and the reduction of stress (Allan et al., 2017), lowering the rate of depression (Allan, 2017), lessening disengagement (You et al., 2020), avoids burnout (K. -L. Tan & Yeap, 2021; K. -L. Tan et al., 2020), and minimizing health risk behavior (Chaolertseree & Taephant, 2020). Meaningful work gained further attention with the emergence of positive psychology scholarship, where “meaning” is identified as one of the components that account for the “good life” – authentic and sustained happiness and well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As a result, the basic premise of meaningful work primarily advocated a “more-is-better” view. The more meaning an individual experiences in work, the better it is.

Despite these developments, this study addresses four gaps in existing literature. First, insufficient attention is paid to the dark side of meaningful work. For instance, Hu and Hirsh (2017) found that people are willing to accept lower salaries for more meaningful work. At the same time, the Oelberger (2018) study found that individuals who experience meaningful work are more willing to overwork, leading to time- and trust-based conflict in their relationships, especially if others do not see value in their work. Therefore, these studies challenge the “more-is-better” view of meaningful work. Beyond this, related studies are beginning to question the permanence of the positive effect of meaningful work. For instance, Tommasi et al. (2020) argued that meaningful work is not a permanent mind-set but a temporary condition that individuals experience episodically. Besides, anecdotal evidence demonstrates the peaking and reduction of work meaningfulness. Bailey and Madden (2016) discovered that when individuals are disconnected from their values, doing work perceived as pointless or at risk of physical/emotional harm, the level of meaningfulness would reduce. In this regard, Knight (2021) further highlights that the feeling of meaninglessness and meaningfulness can happen to the same job at different career points.

Hence, reengaging with one's job by constantly reminding them of their identity and the purpose of their work is essential to offset any forms of meaninglessness (Knight, 2021). Drawing from these works of literature provides insights that challenge the underlying assumption that meaningful work always results in a linear relationship. Building on the sparse evidence, we address the first gap by providing a more balanced view of meaningful work's “more-is-better” perspective. In particular, we build on Bailey, Yeoman, et al. (2018) to affirm the curvilinear effect of meaningful work against a critical employee outcome – work engagement.

The positive outcomes associated with work engagement have prompted many scholars, such as Bouckennooghe et al. (2021), to identify drivers of engagement. Though a growing number of meta-analyses such as Bailey et al. (2017) identified possible antecedents of work engagement, less is known about the psychological mechanisms that influence work engagement. One such construct is meaningful work. Researchers like Albrecht et al. (2021) posit that employees who draw positive affect from the meaning and purpose of their work are more likely to be engaged. Although the conceptual relationship has been addressed to some degree in literature (see Cartwright & Holmes, 2006),

empirical evidence between the two has been limited. Clearly, far lesser for a curvilinear relationship. From both theoretical and managerial perspectives, we address the second gap by providing empirical evidence that sheds light on the function of meaningful work on work engagement – that is, whether social workers who experience a strong sense of purpose and meaning in their work are more likely to be engaged, and if so, is there a curvilinear relationship to it.

Available organizational behavior research such as Darvishmotevali and Ali (2020) generally concludes that the manifestation of the individual corollaries depends mainly on individuals' behavior, such as personality traits and coping mechanisms. This can be attributed to the conversation of resources (COR) theory, which postulated that the interplay of personality traits and immediate environment would determine if it manifested motivational properties or triggered a health impairment process (Bakker & de Vries, 2020). Psychological capital (PsyCap) is adopted as a boundary condition among this study's different personality traits. There are three reasons for this. As a form of resource, the effect of PsyCap on work and life outcomes goes beyond other known personality traits, such as the Big Five traits (Choi & Lee, 2014). Besides, PsyCap is an attitudinal resource that positively impacts individual and organizational performance (Ho & Chan, 2022). However, there have been limited studies on PsyCap among employees of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) (Firestone & Anngela-Cole, 2015). Next, PsyCap, with its reliable and valid measure, resolves the lack of an adequate composite and quantitative measure of positive psychological phenomena, which led to most scholarly work in the past being rather conceptual and definitional than empirical (Luthans et al., 2007). Finally, PsyCap differentiates itself as sufficiently malleable, providing a good rationale for organizations to introduce interventions to develop their sense of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (K. -L. Tan et al., 2020).

Lastly, this study focuses on social workers from NPOs. Despite the growth in research on meaningful work and work engagement in occupational psychology, limited research has been carried out in human service-specific samples (Lizano, 2015, 2021). Additionally, meaningful work research in the third sector remains under-represented (Taylor & Roth, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers underwent transformative changes in practice with the rapid uptake of virtual technologies. Because of this pandemic, the daily routine disruptions they experienced added a layer of complexity to how they view their work and engagement level. Given the unique nature of their work context, employing recommendations from the literature that focuses on for-profit organizations on NPOs may yield limited results (Johansen & Sowa, 2019). Adopting the COR theory focusing on social workers in the NPOs, this study answers K. -L. Tan and Yeap (2021) call to examine further the effect of meaningful work, which builds theory and connects to practice in significant ways.

Putting these together, we argue that the results of this study advance the body of knowledge as we theorize and test a moderating effect of PsyCap on the curvilinear effect of meaningful work on work engagement. This study provides empirical evidence for the complex curvilinear relationship that may have been ambiguous or hidden in some existing studies. Hence, our inquiry offers a valuable conceptual and empirical extension on the effect of having too much of a good thing of meaningful work on work engagement.

Theoretical framework

The COR theory posits that people are motivated to acquire and retain their resources. According to Hobfoll (1989), these resources could come in the form of objects (e.g. vehicles and houses), conditions (e.g. job security, marriage), personal characteristics (e.g. social aplomb, mastery) or energies (e.g. knowledge). The COR theory argues that when one experiences a loss of resources at work, they are more likely to experience strain, which would be disproportionately more salient than resource gain with a more significant and stronger impact (Hobfoll, 1989). In this regard, individuals must acquire more resources to protect and recover from resource loss (Hobfoll, 2014). According to the resource gain tenet, COR theory suggests that resource gain increases salience in

resource loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018). At the same time, the resource loss spirals corollary argues that resource loss is more powerful than resource gain because when resources are lost, individuals and organizations tend to have fewer resources to offset resource loss at each iteration of the stress spiral (Hobfoll et al., 2018). To this end, failure to gain sufficient resources and a potential loss of resources or the actual loss of resources could trigger stress, as postulated by the COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Based on these two tenets, we suggest that relationships could exist between meaningful work, work engagement and PsyCap. As highlighted earlier, meaningful work is a critical resource that drives social workers' engagement at work despite facing work challenges. Therefore, when a social worker's level of meaningfulness increase from low to moderate, it influences their engagement level. Likewise, Luthans et al. (2007) have described PsyCap as a core psychological factor of positivity that goes beyond human and social capital to gain a competitive advantage through investment/development of "who you are." Putting both resources together, it is evident that it follows the "resource gain" perspective of the COR theory, where it counteracts any possible forms of resource loss resulting from the adverse effects of emotionally demanding professions like social work.

Hypotheses development

Meaningful work

Meaningful work is a fundamental human motive (Steger & Dik, 2010). It is an essential resource for employees as it supports them in seeing benefits even under challenging situations, helps them to focus, fosters innovation, and facilitates relationship building (Yeoman, 2014). While there is no universal agreement on the description of meaningful work, our review of definitions across different works of literature (see Table 1) demonstrate that meaningful work can be summarized into five dimensions: (1) individualization, (2) meaning deriving from the greater good, (3) a retrospective sense-making process, (4) a temporality phenomenon, and (5) a double-edged sword.

Individualized realization. Definitions by different authors have associated it with terms such as "perceptions" (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), "understandings" (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003), "judgments" (May et al., 2004), "feelings" (Steger et al., 2010), and "experiences" (Rosso et al., 2010).

Meaning deriving from the greater good. Extant literature documented that individuals who experience meaningful work often discuss how it benefits larger communities. For instance, when students graduate, teachers feel a sense of meaningfulness (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), or social workers witness their clients overcoming life impediments (Chiller & Crisp, 2012)

Retrospective sense-making process. A common characteristic of meaningful work across most literature is meaningfulness is rarely experienced at that moment. Instead, it is a retrospective process where individuals consciously recollect an earlier incident that evokes special meanings (Bailey & Madden, 2016). Instances include entrepreneurs switching lights off during Christmas parties, reminiscing about their business achievements for the year, and researchers belatedly realizing the value of their projects.

Temporality phenomenon. Taking a leaf from the above, meaningful work is never a long-lasting experience. It can only be felt when one's values align with the work goals (Bailey & Madden, 2016). This perspective is verified in an experimental study by Allan et al. (2017), showcasing that when individuals realize they are doing activities that benefit others, it evokes a stronger sense of meaningfulness than them performing activities not knowing the purpose of it.

Double-edged sword. On this note, scholars are also beginning to examine the not-so-positive consequences of meaningful work. For instance, K. -L. Tan et al. (2020) found that despite social workers finding meaning in their work, they also suffered from burnout due to their willingness to overwork. Other scholars such as Allan et al. (2018) have found that pursuing meaningful work leads to under-employment and willingness to accept less-than-desirable compensation packages.

Table 1. Definitions of meaningful work.

Authors	Definition
Hackman and Oldham (1975)	"The degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile."
Wrzesniewski et al. (2003)	"Understandings of the purpose of their work or what they believe is achieved in the work."
Pratt and Ashforth (2003)	"Work and/or its context are perceived by its practitioners to be, at minimum, purposeful and significant."
May et al. (2004)	"The value of a work goal or purposes, judged to the individual's own ideals or standards."
Cheney et al. (2008)	"Similarly, meaningful work, as work that contributes to a personally significant purpose, can be differentiated from work that simply makes us feel good or work that enables us to express and hone our talents."
Bunderson and Thompson (2009)	"Significance, purpose, or transcendent meaning."
Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009)	"In summary, to further our understanding of meaningful work, a helpful starting place might be to (a) frame it as a property of human beings rather than a dimension of leadership or the employing institution, (b) understand the various sources of meaningful work and their relationship with each other, (c) study meaningfulness alongside meaninglessness to discriminate between those systems of meaning which are designed to open up creative possibilities and those which delimit the choices available to individuals (Sievers, 1994), and (d) employ research methods that access the subjective experience of meaningful work."
Rosso et al. (2010)	"Work experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals."
Fairlie (2011)	"Meaningful work is defined as job and other workplace characteristics that facilitate the attainment or maintenance of one or more dimensions of meaning."
Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012)	"Meaningful work captures the complexity of the construct which measures the dimensions of developing the inner self, unity with others, serving others and expressing full potential as well as the dynamic tensions between these through items on 'being' versus 'doing' and 'self' versus 'others.'"
Steger et al. (2012)	"Meaningful experience consist of experiencing positive meaning in work, sensing that work is a key avenue for making meaning and perceiving one's work to benefit some greater good."
Bailey and Madden (2017)	"Meaningfulness arises when an individual perceives an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self."
Allan et al. (2017)	"The pathways to meaningful work can be understood by the intersection of two dimensions: the self-other dimension and the agency-communion dimensions. The self-other dimension refers to whether work activities are directed toward the self or other people, and the agency-communion dimension refers to efforts to separate and expand the self or to connect and unite the self."
Michaelson (2019)	"According to this normative account, meaningful work should be meaningful to oneself and to others and is also meaningful independent of them."

Meaningful work and work engagement

Since Kahn first coined the term, work engagement has attracted considerable interest (Shuck, 2019). Notable scholars such as Albrecht (2013) have worked to outline its nature, instrument for measurement, and identifying drivers and consequences. Among them, Bailey et al. (2017) have concluded that the most popular definition of work engagement comes from Schaufeli et al. (2002), who define work engagement as a positive psychological construct comprising three dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption.

How does meaningful work relate to work engagement? As highlighted earlier, meaningful work arises when individuals perceive their work aligns with their values (Albrecht et al., 2021). In other words, individuals would experience meaningful work when playing a significant role and serving some purpose. Due to the motivational properties of meaningful work, employees would find it easier to approach work-related activities with more vigor, dedication, and absorption (Vermooten et al., 2019)

From another perspective, we can argue that meaningful work that is extremely low might not be desirable for organizations. Individuals with too low of meaningful work would not see the value of their job, which results in them not making sufficient efforts to stay engaged. This can also be seen in Ahmed et al. (2016). This perspective is especially relevant to social workers. The meaning of work is closely related to direct contact with clients or patients, which has been identified as the core of social work (Geisler et al., 2019). Social workers are generally intrinsically motivated and guided by altruism

and idealism (Geisler et al., 2019). Other than serving the need of the clients, social workers are taking on the role of macro-practitioner (Huang et al., 2021). They speak out on issues that result in the polarization of the economy and social stratification within the community. Naturally, these changes increase social workers' cognitive and emotional demands. With increasing caseloads, growing complexity of cases, never-ending administrative work, work-life imbalance, multiple role expectations, and job insecurity, job strains within social workers have increased considerably (Camacho, 2016). According to Bailey and Madden (2016), such an increment in role exhaustion erodes work meaningfulness. To this end, Jiang et al. (2022) corroborated these perspectives, highlighting that social workers who are constantly faced with work overload run the risk of burnout, leading them to feel more disengaged and, eventually, leave the profession.

In this regard, we posit that when facing unfinished work tasks, social workers could experience lower work meaningfulness, and engagement level drops as it decreases. Following Pitowsky-Nave (2022), decreasing meaningfulness would increase at one point, as social workers reminisce about their achievements. This postulation aligns with Bailey and Madden's (2017) argument that work meaningfulness would be apparent in retrospect, which can be hard to acknowledge and appreciate at that moment. As such, we can expect a U-shaped curvilinear relationship between meaningful work and work engagement, leading to the following hypothesis:

H1: The relationship between meaningful work and engagement is curvilinear with a U-shaped curve.

Moderating role of psychological capital

As a resource, PsyCap is an individual's positive state of development that can be explained by four aspects – hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Hope reflects one's perseverance and deployment of resources to redirect efforts toward achieving the set goal. Efficacy refers to confidence in taking on and putting in the effort to complete challenging tasks. Resilience is the ability to sustain and bounce back when beset with problems and adversities. Optimism is a positive attribute that one will succeed in the future (Youssef & Luthans, 2012).

According to the COR theory, employees strive to obtain, build, and protect resources (Hobfoll, 1989). While the resources can be of different forms, individuals who have access to and can draw upon a deeper well of resources would better cope with work stress. Hence, PsyCap might serve as moderating variable when examining the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement. For this study, we focused on PsyCap because of its malleability (Firestone & Anngela-Cole, 2015). According to Luthans et al. (2006), the levels of PsyCap can be improved through interventions such as training. Once it is developed, it tends to persist over time. Therefore, PsyCap offers important implications for organizations because it influences how employees think and act in their work capacities (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2015).

In this regard, it is not surprising that many studies, such as Ho and Chan (2022) have confirmed that PsyCap is the mechanism that explains the extraordinary performance of human capital within organizations, especially in its effectiveness as a resource in predicting work-related and individual behavior. Besides, studies have also concluded that PsyCap is an effective moderator in lowering individuals' undesirable corollaries. For instance, Darvishmotevali and Ali (2020) found that employees with a high level of PsyCap can cope with job insecurity. Similar results were found where PsyCap has been found to buffer the curvilinear effects of job insecurity on performance (Probst et al., 2017). Likewise, Hao et al. (2015) have found that individuals with higher PsyCap can manage depressive symptoms resulting from conflicts between work and family better.

Putting these together, it is evident that these pieces of literature gravitate toward PsyCap as a valuable resource for supporting active engagement and generating the motivational properties to

manage employees' job demands. Therefore, we postulate that PsyCap serves an instrumental role for social workers, that they leveraged it to enhance their engagement in work and sustain their sense of work meaningfulness.

H2: PsyCap may moderate the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement.

Methods

Research design and sample

To ensure that only *bonafide* social workers participated in the survey, we sought assistance from the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW). SASW is the only organization that accredits social workers in Singapore, where one must possess relevant qualifications and experience and be employed in the social work position with in-employment training. SASW disseminated the online survey developed through the *SoGoSurvey* online platform to their members working in NPOs. Other studies such as Nguyen et al. (2022), K. -L. Tan et al. (2022) and K. -L. Tan and Yeap (2021) have also adopted the same online platform to collect data. In Singapore, NPOs are legally constituted organizations whose primary purpose is to support or engage in activities of public or private interest without any commercial or monetary profit (K. -L. Tan and Yeap, 2021). NPOs concentrate on social, political, and environmental aims. It provides an ideal space for researchers to examine the effect of meaningful work (Taylor & Roth, 2019). Social workers would work in NPOs that usually revolve around family dynamics, assisting vulnerable or disadvantaged individuals and families (Beckett, 2017).

A convenience sampling method was adopted in this study as the complete list of the SASW members was not made available to us for data privacy reasons. The online survey form contained a cover letter outlining the purpose of the survey and promises of anonymity, confidentiality, and volunteer participation. Data collection was done over six weeks. During the data collection process, two reminders were sent out. The contents of each reminder were customized to reflect the progress of data collection while reiterating assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. These e-mail reminders created a sense of urgency where respondents prioritized completing and returning the survey (Ali et al., 2020). As of the closing date, a total of 223 usable responses were used in our data analysis, with a response rate of 33.9% against the total number of SASW members ($n = 656$).¹ Adopting the inverse square root method by Kock and Hadaya (2018), where 160 is set as the recommended minimum sample, our sample size exceeded this requirement, meaning analysis can be done. Moreover, the researchers have employed the G*Power statistical tool and found that the minimum sample size required for this study is 107, with an effect size of 0.15 and a 95% power level. Regarding the above evidence, it can be ascertained that the sample size of 223 is deemed sufficient for the present study.

Analytical method

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in the present study was employed to assess the validity of constructs and their measurement items. The purpose of CFA is to examine the model fit of the measurement model and address the matter related to constructs' convergent and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017; J. X. Tan et al., 2019). As highlighted by Hair et al. (2010), the model fit of a research model can be determined based on various indices such as Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Normed Chi-square (χ^2/df), Goodness of Fit (GFI), Parsimony Normed Fit Index (PNFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). It was reported that a research model is considered fit if

¹Information obtained from <https://www.ifsw.org/member-organisation/singapore/> (accurate as of 3 April 2023)

the RMSEA is less than 0.08, χ^2/df is less than 3, GFI is more than or equal to 0.90, PNFI is more than 0.50, and TLI is greater than or equal to 0.90 (Hair et al., 2010)

After addressing the model fit, we tested the convergent and discriminant validity. The purpose is to examine how well the latent variables and the loadings of its measured variables are consistent with what was expected in the pre-establish theory, particularly regarding its operationalization (Hair et al., 2017). Moreover, validity and reliability tests should be emphasized in research to ensure the data's usefulness and quality (Hair et al., 2017). Apart from that, convergent and discriminant validity are commonly used in social science research in responding to the above concerns (Bachrach et al., 2022; Caesens et al., 2016; Cham et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2018). The convergent validity for the constructs and their measurement items was assessed based on the conditions suggested by Hair et al. (2010), whereby the convergent validity is considered established if (1) the value of factor loadings for the measurement items of all the constructs exceeded 0.60, (2) the value of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each of the constructs is greater than 0.50, and (3) the value of composite reliability (CR) for each of the constructs is equal or larger than 0.70.

As for the context of discriminant validity, the suggestion by Fornell and Larcker (1981) was used in this study to address this matter. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), discriminant validity is said to establish if (1) the values of the variance shared between any two constructs are smaller than the value of the square root of AVE and (2) the value of the AVE for all the constructs are larger than its respective values of maximum shared variance (MSV).

Once we established the model's validity and reliability, we adopted a four-step regression approach that was grounded on the suggestions from the previous studies used to examine the quadratic and moderated quadratic effects of the research model (Bachrach et al., 2022; Caesens et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018). Firstly, the control variables (i.e., age, sex, and education) were regressed against work engagement (Step 1), followed by quadratic meaningful work term (Step 2) to assess the effect of curvilinearity. In Step 3, a moderator term (i.e. PsyCap) has been added to the model and followed by the inclusion of interaction terms of PsyCap with all the previous terms (i.e., control variables, quadratic term, and interaction term) being retained in the model (Step 4). Based on the guideline proposed by Cohen et al. (2014), the shape of the curvilinear relationship was calculated based on reference to the outcome variable (i.e., work engagement) against different values of employees' perception toward meaningful work.

Measures

The nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) was used to measure work engagement against the three dimensions of vigor, dedication and absorption. Adopted from Schaufeli et al. (2006), the items are measured on a seven-point Likert scale, with "1" being strongly disagree to "7" being strongly agree. Sample questions include "At my work, I feel bursting with energy," "Time flies when I'm working," and "When I am working, I forget everything else around me." The composite reliability score is 0.932.

We used the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) developed by Luthans et al. (2007). The composite reliability score is 0.861. PCQ is a 24-items instrument against four dimensions of hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism. The items are measured on a six-point Likert scale with "1" being strongly disagree to "6" being strongly agree. Sample questions include "I feel confident when I'm looking for a solution to a long-term problem," "I can think of many ways to achieve my goals at work," and "I can overcome the difficult times at work because I already came through difficulties in the past."

Meaningful work was measured using The Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) developed by Steger et al. (2012). Operationalize in three dimensions of greater good motivation, positive meaning at work and meaning-making through work, WAMI is a ten-item instrument measured on a five-point Likert scale of "1" being absolutely untrue to "5" being absolutely true. Sample questions include

“I have found a meaningful career,” “I view my work as contributing to my personal growth,” and I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.” The composite reliability score is 0.898.

In addition, the control variables in the present study were measured based on the sex, education level, and age of the respondents who participated in the present study. According to Becker (2005), control variables are included in the study as they can help the researcher to accurately estimate the effect of the independent variable(s) on a resulting outcome (e.g., dependent variable). Moreover, control variables are reported to have the capability to enhance the internal validity of a study as well.

Results

Demographic profile

Table 2 presents the profile of the respondents who participated in this study. Most of the respondents were female (82.1%) and fell under the 35–44 age group (31.8%). As for academic qualification, almost three-quarters of the respondents possessed a bachelor’s degree and above. Table 2 also indicated that most respondents have worked as social workers for more than ten years (41.3%).

Common Method Variance (CMV) assessment

This present study assessed CMV based on the guideline suggested by the previous studies (Low et al., 2021; Podsakoff et al., 2003). According to Podsakoff et al. (2003), CMV is a significant issue in data analysis as it could directly impact the data, affecting the provide false correlation among the variables and the consistency of the data. Harman’s Single Factor technique was used to assess the CMV in the present study. CMV is assumed to be a problem in a study if the value of the first and largest factor’s variance explained generated from the factor analysis is greater than 40% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The outcome of the factor analysis of the present study shows that the value of the first and largest factor explains 35.47% of the total variance projected. Thus, it can be assumed that common method bias is not a significant issue in this study.

Confirmatory factor analysis

For this study, the measurement model shows that the RMSEA = 0.063, χ^2/df = 1.882, GFI = 0.880, PNFI = 0.785, and TLI = 0.942, suggesting that the measurement model is fit. Having addressed the

Table 2. Respondents’ profile.

Variables	Descriptions	Percentage
Gender	Male	17.9
	Female	82.1
Age	18–24 years old	1.3
	25–34 years old	34.5
	35–44 years old	31.8
	45–54 years old	20.6
	55–64 years old	10.3
	above 65 years old	1.3
	Doctoral Degree	0.9
Level of Education	Master Degree	31.4
	Bachelor Degree	57.8
	Diploma	4.9
	Others	4.9
	Less than 1 year	4.5
Experience	1 year to 3 years	16.6
	4 years to 7 years	22.4
	7 years to 10 years	15.2
	More than 10 years	41.3

Table 3. Results of convergent and discriminant validity.

	F.L	C.R	AVE	MSV	PSY	MW	WE
Phycological Capital (PsyCap)	0.690–0.907	0.861	0.611	0.386	<i>0.781</i>		
Meaningful Work (MW)	0.677–0.685	0.898	0.524	0.213	0.461	<i>0.724</i>	
Work Engagement (WE)	0.589–0.936	0.932	0.635	0.386	0.621	0.429	<i>0.797</i>

Note: F.L = Factor Loading, C.R = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted, MSV = maximum shared variance.

model fit, the next step examines convergent and discriminant validity. In this case, two items for meaningful work and an item of work engagement had been removed due to their low loading (i.e., less than 0.50). After removing these items, the findings, as shown in Table 3, have indicated that the measurement model fulfilled the requirements of convergent validity. Hence, it can be surmised that the convergent validity of this study was established. The findings in Table 3 have indicated that the values of the squared root of AVE (diagonal entries in italics) are greater than the values of correlation (off-diagonal entries in bold). Additionally, the values of AVE for all the constructs are greater than its own MSV values. It can be concluded that the discriminant validity of the data for the present study was established. Having addressed the requirements of the measurement model, the results of the curvilinear relationship between meaningful work and work engagement were presented in the following section.

Quadratic analysis

As highlighted in Table 4, the quadratic effect of meaningful work for the regression model predicting work engagement was significantly related ($\beta = 0.359$, $p < .001$, model 3). The outcome of the quadratic analysis via SPSS, as projected in Figure 1, showed a U-shaped relationship between meaningful work and work engagement. Moreover, it was also evidenced that the R square value has improved by 0.032 from the regression model without the squared meaningful work (linear relationship) of model 2 to the regression model 3 with squared meaningful work (curvilinear relationship). Based on the above findings, it can be confirmed that hypothesis 1 in the present study was supported.

In addition to the above, the moderating effect of PsyCap on the curvilinear relationship between meaningful work and work engagement, as curated in hypothesis 2 was addressed using the SPSS through the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013). Moreover, taking reference from Hayes (2022), the benefits of using PROCESS macro in assessing curvilinearity and moderated quadratic

Table 4. Multiple hierarchical regression results.

	Work Engagement				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Step 1: Control variables					
Age	0.130	0.105	0.070	−0.012	−0.016
Sex	−0.068	−0.048	−0.087	−0.057	−0.046
Education	0.123	0.021	0.015	0.067	0.047
Step 2: Main effect of Meaningful Work					
Meaningful work		0.105	−0.201	0.026	0.145
Meaningful work squared			0.359**	0.042	0.054
Step 3: Moderator variable					
Psychological capital				0.964**	0.878**
Step 4: Moderating effect of Psychological Capital					
Meaningful work * Psychological Capital					0.356
Meaningful work squared * Psychological Capital					−0.190*
Overall F	1.726	8.928**	9.093**	21.453**	17.301**
R ²	0.023	0.141	0.173	0.373	0.393
Change in R ²	0.023	0.118	0.032	0.200	0.020

Note: **p < .001, *p < .05.

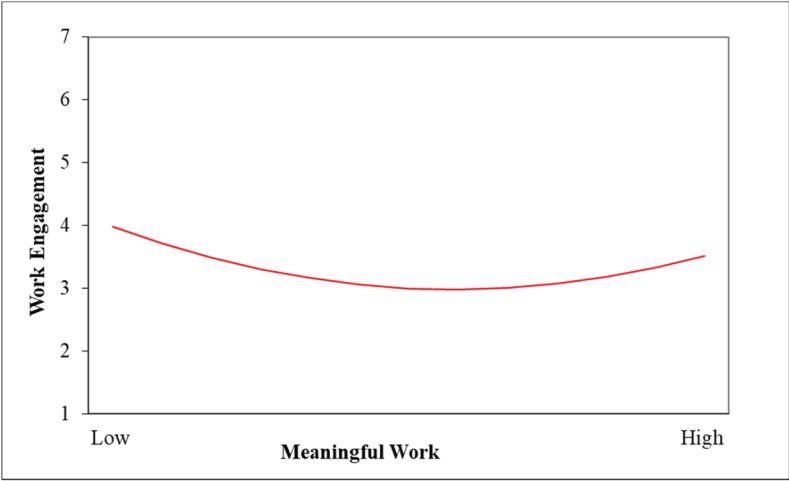


Figure 1. Curvilinear relationship between meaningful work and work engagement.

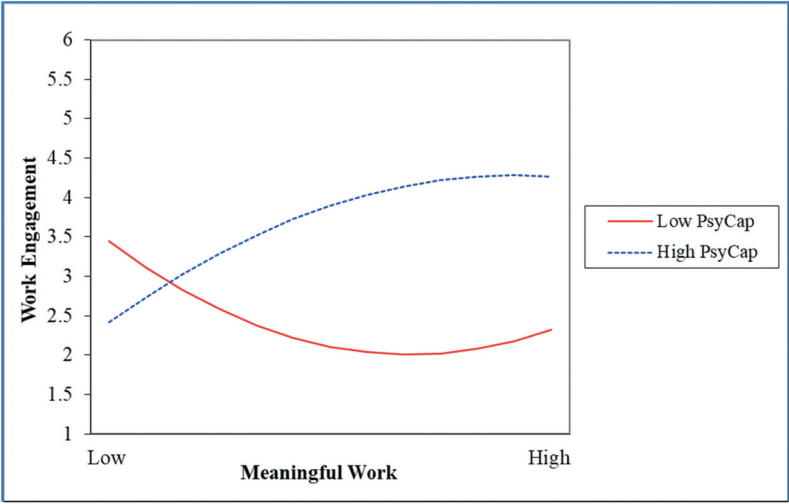


Figure 2. The moderating effect of psychological cap on curvilinear relationship between meaningful work and work engagement.

analysis includes its capability in addressing the requirements of the pick-a-point approach (i.e., simple slope analysis) and Johnson-Neyman technique, which are important in ascertaining the moderation effect on the curvilinear of the association between meaningful work and work engagement. Additionally, the variables in the present study were mean-centered before creating the quadratic and interaction terms to minimize the issue of multicollinearity and to enhance the interpretability of the results (Dawson & Richter, 2006)

As highlighted in Table 4, the interaction term of squared meaningful work and psychological capital was statistically significant ($\beta = -0.190, p < .05$, model 5). Figure 2 shows that the relation between meaningful work and work engagement followed an inverted U-shaped relationship for those with high psychological capital levels. In contrast, an opposite pattern was observed on the group of respondents with low levels of psychological capital. Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Discussion

As highlighted earlier, meaningful work is a key reason for social workers as they pursue a cause they strongly believe in, allowing them to make a difference in the community in which they work. However, most research has argued that there is a linear relationship between meaningful work and work engagement (Albrecht et al., 2021; K. -L. Tan & Yeap, 2021; K. -L. Tan et al., 2020). Our results complemented these findings revealing that the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement is U-shaped. There are two probable explanations for this phenomenon.

First, this could be due to the job demands of social workers. This reason is evident in a recent report by Mithran (2020), stating that social workers' current workload pressures prevented them from experiencing the key motivation for joining the profession – making a difference in individual circumstances. The same report also highlighted those social workers spent 19% of their typical week on frontline work, compared with 40% on administration, 25% on attending meetings, and 10% on traveling (Mithran, 2020). Besides, social workers have also lamented that their distress is not taken seriously enough by employers, exacerbating their negative emotions (Cooper, 2018). As a result, the ability to experience meaningful work is reduced (Mithran, 2020). This parallels Bailey, Lips-Wiersma, et al. (2018) perspective that while meaningfulness is a subjective assessment, it is also grounded in an external, objective context that shapes and legitimizes what may be considered meaningful by the individual. In alignment with the COR theory, when meaningful work as a resource reduces, it triggers a negative effect, lessening social workers' level of engagement.

Second, our result of diminishing returns that eventually increase demonstrates that social workers do reminisce about their achievements. Such recollection would raise awareness of one's purpose at work, which could generate strong emotions. This explanation aligns with many works of literature, such as Bailey and Madden (2019), indicating that meaningful work does not reflect a continuous psychological state. Instead, it is an episodic experience at work that requires individuals to make conscious attempts to ponder and figure out how it integrates into individuals' belief systems. Hence, when social workers realize that their work, including the administrative tasks, serves a larger purpose that aligns with their values, their work meaningfulness increases, and their engagement levels.

On the other hand, we also find that meaningful work and work engagement follow an inverted U-shaped relationship for those with high levels of PsyCap, with an opposite pattern observed for respondents with low levels of PsyCap. This phenomenon demonstrates that the curvilinear relationship is contingent on social workers' PsyCap. It aligns with the COR theory that applying resources would help employees concentrate on the work tasks more efficiently and effectively (Milosevic et al., 2017; Tüzün et al., 2018). It also shows that PsyCap combined at a higher-order construct allows social workers to be more engaged at work, giving them more confidence and stimulating positive thinking, which bolsters their sense of work meaningfulness.

However, the inverted U-shaped relationship, which shows the diminishing returns of meaningful work on work engagement, demonstrates a dark side to it as well. A probable explanation could be that social workers with high PsyCap may seek tasks that continuously allow them to express their sense of hopefulness, resilience, self-confidence and optimism (K. -L. Tan et al., 2020; Nolzen, 2018). Therefore, if social workers consider that the existing workload or the nature of work does not allow them to manifest these traits, they will attach lower meaningfulness to it, which following the COR theory, results in a reduction of engagement.

Theoretical implications

These findings shed new light on the intricacies of meaningful work and how it functions against work engagement in the presence of PsyCap in both theory and practice. First, this study advances the body of knowledge by presenting empirical evidence that a curvilinear relationship exists between meaningful work and work engagement. With this finding, this paper is the first to legitimize the concept

that experiencing meaningful work is indeed episodic, temporary and requires a conscious effort by social workers to reminisce past achievements.

Second, this study also makes a theoretical contribution to the effect of PsyCap on the curvilinear relationship. The finding reveals that high PsyCap social workers may be dysfunctional for the optimal functioning of meaningful work on work engagement. This result challenges the notion that “the higher the PsyCap, the higher the work engagement.” Therefore, this study responds to Nolzen (2018) call to broaden the boundary conditions of PsyCap and analyze it in the context of strategic human resources management.

The final critical contribution is validating a framework linking work engagement to meaningful work via PsyCap within the social work context. Considering the importance of motivation driving NPOs employees’ willingness to work and perception of work differs from for-profit employees, the present study responds to the call of Park et al. (2018) by “drawing more attention to testing the formulation of the COR model and influences of job resources in nonprofit settings” (p. 20).

Managerial implications

The present findings have implications for practice. First, the results show that meaningful work enhances work engagement. Hence, NPOs should provide a safe space where social workers can share their victories, perspectives, and frustrations. Frazier et al. (2017) highlighted that a psychologically safe environment would provide social workers to develop an authentic connection between their work and a broader purpose beyond themselves. At the same time, NPOs should provide ample support to employees and ensure they fit well into the new social work environment. As social workers gain experience and contribute to society, NPOs should take the precaution of addressing the distress social workers experience. At the same time, NPOs need to monitor the task requirements at the optimal level for each social worker.

At the same time, our results demonstrate PsyCap is an instrumental construct that influences social workers’ perception of their work. Given the malleable characteristics of PsyCap, NPOs can offer interventions in the form of training. For example, NPOs can provide reflection exercises to help social workers identify their goals and potential obstacles. Another intervention is to introduce a structured training program. Among them, a web-based program that is readily available can complement social workers’ busy schedules. Another aspect would be to set challenging yet achievable goals. As K. -L. Tan et al. (2020) highlighted, having milestones and laying down the expected outcomes helps employees think optimistically and be hopeful as they would be drawing resources to make it happen. Training in PsyCap can also happen at the leadership level. After all, it is espoused that the PsyCap of leaders influences employees’ well-being and engagement (Rabenu et al., 2017). However, the curvilinear effect of PsyCap on the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement means that NPOs should also design career advancement paths for social workers with high PsyCap. Leadership training, sending them on sabbatical leaves, and developing dedicated leadership pathways are vital strategies NPOs can consider.

Limitations and future directions

This study has some limitations that give rise to future research directions. First, the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement may be bidirectional. For example, it could be that employees who are more engaged would feel more meaningful in their work. Hence, future studies can disentangle to clarify how engagement and meaningful work mutually influence one another. Second, social work is a profession that is highly contextualized. For instance, social work in developed countries like Singapore differs from that in developing countries like Uganda and Tanzania. These differences are especially stark in the availability of resources, different cultures, value systems, and societal norms, amongst other aspects. Hence, it is not unreasonable to say that social workers face different job demands and emphasize what constitutes resources from country to country. Future

researchers can do a comparative study of the same constructs across different countries. Finally, there are different NPOs in Singapore, ranging from culture and recreation, education and research, and animal and environmental protection. The same model can be replicated across these establishments to see if similar results can be obtained.

Conclusion

With Singapore's challenges of higher social immobility, aging population, and increasing cost of living, NPOs' importance is gaining more prominence in this society. This study is timely to unravel the complexities of the role of social work to provide practical implications that NPOs can leverage to retain and attract capable individuals.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Approval

The questionnaire and methodology for this study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Office of the Curtin University (Ethics approval number: HRE2017-0239).

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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