



## Linking concepts of playfulness and well-being at work in retail sector

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### ABSTRACT

This conceptual article discusses the roles of playfulness and well-being at work in the retail sector with a specific emphasis on service encounters. The aim is to create a new conceptual framework to enhance research on how the element of playfulness can be part of an employee's working environment in the retail sector, and to discuss how playfulness could enhance employee's well-being at work. The framework identifies various interactive relationships characteristic to the retail environment. Furthermore, the application of playfulness in these relationships is discussed from the viewpoint of well-being at work. The framework provides a solid basis for further research to produce results with practical implications.

### 1. Introduction

Organizations have become increasingly aware of the positive implications of promoting well-being at work. Well-being at work is a concept that can be associated with various aspects of workplace health promotion (Anttonen and Vainio, 2010). In this study we consider well-being at work as a holistic construct that relates to organizational conditions such as occupational health and safety as well as to personal level aspects such as increased motivation, lower stress, happiness and longer working careers but also to productivity at individual, organizational, and societal levels. Based on various conceptualizations, well-being at work includes both objective and subjective perspectives (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2013; Schulte and Vainio, 2010; Dul et al., 2012; Rodriguez-Munoz and Sanz-Vergel, 2013). A view of this kind can be considered to refer to a holistic perspective on well-being at work.

In this paper, well-being at work is approached from the holistic perspective of the balanced work system theory. This theory provides a human-centric framework for human well-being, and addresses employees as productive units whose performance is affected by different discomforts and loads (Smith and Carayon-Sainfort, 1989; Carayon, 2006). Traditionally retail firms have spent considerable amounts of money in order to achieve higher customer satisfaction but at the same time they might have underestimated the negative effects of employee burnout symptoms and related absenteeism on customer satisfaction (Söderlund, 2017). While there are challenges concerning well-being at

work in other sectors as well, it can be presumed that in order to promote their employees' well-being, retail firms also need tools which integrate physical, mental and emotional aspects of health (DeJoy and Wilson, 2003).

Retail services involve various jobs and work tasks. However, in this paper we are especially interested in the tasks in which the employee is in contact with a customer in one way or another. This interaction is known as a service encounter. Service encounter here is considered as the time when a consumer interacts with a service; this definition encompasses all personal, physical and other tangible elements involved in the situation (Shostack, 1985; Bitner, 1990). Service encounter can also be approached through its three key elements as described by Wu and Liang (2009), i.e. environmental element, service employee factors and consumer factors.

The present article argues that playfulness can potentially promote individual employee well-being. With playfulness we refer to individual's disposition "composed of creativity, curiosity, sense of humor, and spontaneity" (Guitard et al., 2005). This article further depicts how playfulness can enhance employee well-being within a service encounter setting in the retail sector. When it comes to adult playfulness, it has not been widely researched (Van Vleet and Feeney, 2015a; Staempfli, 2007). Furthermore, it appears that playfulness has not often been linked to well-being at work even though some consequences of playfulness in a work setting have been addressed in research (Guitard et al., 2005).

The assumption that playfulness works well in the retail sector is

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based on the fact that in retail firms' employees are often young people who value fun at work (see Romero and Pescosolido, 2008; Lamm and Meeks, 2009). Recently, Plester and Hutchison (2016) have empirically discussed how workplace fun seems to relate to work engagement both at the individual task level, and at broader organizational team or unit level. Furthermore, Tews et al. (2015) have found that in particular, fun job responsibilities play a big role in promoting younger employees' embeddedness in work activities. These studies have inspired us to discuss the potential of playfulness in promoting well-being at work. More general trends also suggest that playfulness might be useful regarding well-being at work: e.g. gamification has become common at workplaces (see Dale, 2014), and smart environments utilizing playfulness (Nijholt, 2016) have emerged. Moreover, playful elements added to individual objects, such as playful key rings, can be employed as positive psychological interventions (Desmet and Sääksjärvi, 2016).

As for playfulness, we have adopted the idea that it can exist at multiple levels and we have also born in mind that employees are affected by their customers (Johnson et al., 1994). In essence, we approach the phenomenon from the aspect of promoting employee well-being and consequently, take a positive stance on the effects of playfulness. Hence, we acknowledge that we do not focus on the potentially negative consequences related to playfulness, such as negative effects of employees' joking behavior on customer satisfaction in service encounters (Söderlund et al., 2017). Instead, our goal is to depict the positive potential of playfulness to employee well-being.

Our aim here is to conduct a review (see Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Grant and Booth, 2009) in order to create a new framework which integrates the positive aspects of playfulness and well-being at work within retailing with a special focus on the contexts of service encounters. We attempt to build a framework that reviews and synthesizes the existing literature on the subject of the role of playfulness to promote employee well-being in service encounters. The objective behind this is to summarize findings and to determine research gaps and targets for empirical research in the future.

## 2. Methods

For the present paper, a review of relevant literature was carried out in order to provide an overview on the literature pertinent to the topic. The review conducted here bears resemblance with more than one type of review but in particular some features of a scoping review and a critical review are apparent. Firstly, we aim to summarize research findings and identify research gaps in the existing literature. This is in line with reasons for a scoping study as stated by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Moreover, a scoping review can be a preliminary enquiry into a phenomenon (Campbell et al., 2011). Secondly, our goal is to find the most significant topic-related literature and to create a framework involving the novel idea of integrating playfulness and well-being in service encounters; a critical review can have these kinds of features (Grant and Booth, 2009). We have also followed a modified version of the scoping study process of five stages as depicted by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). With the exception of the stage of charting the data, we followed the scoping review process. As for charting the data, a detailed list of references was left out from this paper on account of the paper having a more comprehensive goal of forming a new framework.

### 2.1. Review process

In accordance with the first stage of the scoping review process, a research question was formulated. This research question is related to multiple areas of research. Essentially, we are interested in how playfulness can be incorporated into the service encounter settings in retail sector so as to promote the well-being of employees in those settings. The second stage was about identifying relevant studies. In order to do this, we searched for literature in the following research areas: well-being at work, (adult) playfulness, retail sector and service encounter.

Concepts from these areas were used as search terms to find scientific literature via the database of Scopus; launched in 2004, it is a large abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature. No restrictions were used in the search but the search was confined to the documents published in English. In consequence, all the documents found in Scopus were reviewed. Additionally, relevant sources found in the previous studies by the authors and in the reference lists of the existing sources were also utilized in the formation of the framework.

In the following phases, the study selection and charting the data stages, the relevance of the literature was assessed based on the subject areas, the titles, the abstracts and finally, the full texts. It appeared that there were various irrelevant studies related to e.g. the field of medicine as playfulness was at times studied in the context of therapy. Further, service encounter was occasionally studied in the context of patient and nursing staff. The number of relevant sources in each area of research was relatively limited and as a consequence, lists of them were not drawn up. The last stage, reporting of the research results, will be covered in the next chapter.

### 2.2. Reporting search results

As the areas to be covered were several and diverse in nature, the search involved several independent searches, each of which concentrated on a specific area of interest in this paper. The first area to be covered was well-being at work which was combined with retail sector in the subsequent phases of the search. As the searches resulted in a relatively low number of documents, the search word 'well-being at work' was replaced with more negative oriented search words; i.e. 'physical stressor', 'psychosocial stressor', 'occupational safety' and 'occupational accident'. All in all 218 documents were found. From those 44 were considered potentially appropriate when the subject areas, the titles and the abstracts were studied.

The second search was related to (adult) playfulness complemented by retail and service encounter in the later phases. Lastly, the two main concepts of well-being and playfulness were combined and a search related to these was carried out. Firstly, using 'playfulness' as the search word yielded a substantial number of results, altogether 1343 documents written in English. Of these close to 70% were published in the past ten years. Because the results were numerous and this paper is particularly focused on adult playfulness, another search was performed using the words 'playfulness' and 'adults'. This yielded 150 results which were studied more carefully in terms of their titles, abstracts and full texts. After examining the titles and abstracts, some documents were left out based on e.g. the discipline (medicine, health profession etc.); still, twenty documents were deemed potential in terms of the topic in this paper. 'Playfulness' combined with 'retail' and 'service encounter' yielded very few results, seven altogether, and they were mostly concerned with the consumer perspective. 'Playfulness' together with 'well-being'/'wellbeing' yielded 27 results of which five were potentially relevant in our context.

All in all, we gained some important sources via the scoping review. Furthermore, sources found while reviewing the reference lists and while conducting previous studies proved to be especially valuable in the formation of the framework. By examining the results, especially produced by the electronic review, it became quite obvious that a lot of the existing research has been published in the past ten years. It also turned out that there are very few studies combining playfulness and well-being.

## 3. Key concepts

### 3.1. Well-being at work in retail context

Employee well-being as a subjective and objective characteristic poses challenges to management. Traditional management literature discusses individual employee well-being as a multidimensional

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