

Innovation is the key: identifying factors to increase career satisfaction and psychological well-being in millennial and generation Z sport employees

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study was to investigate how to generate innovative work behaviors among Millennial and Generation Z sport employees and its impact on their career satisfaction and psychological well-being.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors used structural equation modeling to examine the relationships among predictors of job engagement, innovative work behaviors, career satisfaction and psychological well-being. The model was tested across managerial sport employees of Division I athletics departments ($N = 224$).

Findings – The highlights of the study include job engagement's positive relationship with innovative work behaviors and the positive influence of innovative work behavior on career satisfaction and psychological well-being.

Originality/value – These findings signify the importance of considering job engagement and innovative work behaviors to develop a positive work experience for Millennial and Generation Z sport employees. Doing so is thought to be a critical step in cultivating an organizational competitive advantage via younger generations of sport employees.

Keywords Innovative work behaviours, Psychological well-being, Sport employees, Generation Z, Millennials

Paper type Research paper

The [World Economic Forum \(2020\)](#) has recognized that innovation, creativity and technology use will soon be the top three desirable employee job attributes. The Fourth Industrial Revolution represents the recent burst in technology advancements (e.g. automation, advanced analytics) driving widespread technology adoption among many organizations ([World Economic Forum, 2020](#)). Consequently, it has forced more organizations to prioritize employee innovation to gain a competitive edge in their respective industries ([Dombrowski and Wagner, 2014](#)). Innovation encompasses the implementation of creative ideas, which range from new services and products to procedures and policies ([Amabile, 1988](#)). Innovative employees actively generate ideas, mobilize such ideas with colleagues, and execute them in a



systematic way, resulting in enhanced organizational performance (Li *et al.*, 2019). Importantly, innovation is essential for sport organizations facing various challenges such as limited resources and rigorous job demands, which threatens their ability to be successful and assure organization survival (Hoerber *et al.*, 2015).

Employees' workplace innovation is a crucial feature of their job attitudes (e.g. career satisfaction; Wipulanusat *et al.*, 2018) and individual well-being (e.g. psychological well-being; Rasulzada and Dackert, 2009). The benefits of innovation have driven scholars to examine how to improve sport organizations' capacity to generate knowledge and innovation (e.g. Girginov *et al.*, 2015; Hoerber *et al.*, 2015), as well as to foster employee well-being (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2019). Notably, efforts to develop human capital among sport employees have been viewed as a strong mechanism to initiate innovations in sport organizations (Delshab *et al.*, 2022) and well-being among sport employees (Kim *et al.*, 2019). To uniquely contribute to the line of research pertaining to innovation among sport employees, this study examines the future generations of sport leaders and decision-makers (i.e. Millennial and Generation Z) who are prone to engage in innovative behaviors (Bencsik *et al.*, 2016). The willingness to engage in innovative behaviors positions Millennial and Generation Z employees as a valuable population to study the preconditions and impact of innovations in sport organizations. Weight *et al.* (2021) stated that sport organizations rely on low-wage early-career support staff,—including entry-level employees, graduate assistants, and interns—heavily impacted by age (i.e. Generation Z, Millennials). These employees are motivated to grow within the organization and vital for the future of these organization. As such, exploring innovative behaviors among younger sport employees offers insights into the landscape of sport organizations through an assessment of innovation opportunities and gaps.

Generation Y (Millennials), born between 1981 and 1994, is currently rising through the ranks in organizations and becoming first- and mid-level managers (Gabrielova and Buchko, 2021). Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2009 (Goh and Okumus, 2020), is now entering the workforce. Generation Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation, and they are characterized as technology-savvy because they have not known a world without the internet (Schroth, 2019). Millennial and Generation Z employees are similar as they tend to leverage technology to be innovative and meet challenges at work (Chillakuri, 2020). However, due to “helicopter parenting”, Generation Z are relatively vulnerable to stress and mental health issues (Cartwright-Stroupe and Shinnars, 2021). Thus, the intersection of Millennial and Generation Z well-being and the need for innovation within sport organizations presents an opportunity to examine how sport organizations can leverage their human capital to enhance their innovation capacity. Moreover, supporting innovation among Millennial and Generation Z sport employees is likely to assist their well-being, but also the performance of their respective sport organization (Delshab *et al.*, 2022).

This study is designed to examine innovation among Millennial and Generation Z sport employees and the related human capital implications for employees and organizations. Innovation and creative behaviors among sport employees have begun to receive more attention from scholars (e.g. Delshab *et al.*, 2022; Winand and Anagnostopoulos, 2017). The purpose of this study is to (1) investigate how innovation can be cultivated among Millennial and Generation Z sport employees, and (2) how taking part in innovation impacts their workplace experiences. Resultantly, we have constructed a model to examine antecedents of sport employee innovative behaviors as well as its impact on their workplace experiences (i.e. psychological well-being and career satisfaction) to further develop the understanding of how innovation impacts human capital development among younger employees in sport organizations. A prominent antecedent of innovation in the sport setting is job engagement (Paek *et al.*, 2022), and so we have positioned job engagement as a direct antecedent of

innovative work behaviors. To predict job engagement, we have utilized variables that are relevant to engagement and innovation (i.e. creative self-efficacy, technology anxiety, sport employee identification, and innovative climate).

Self-determination theory (SDT; [Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000](#)) was a guiding theoretical framework for the study because of its association with human development (e.g. innovation) and well-being. SDT explains that individuals are motivated to partake in workplace activities when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness have been met. Thus, employees are motivated to be engaged in their work to fulfill these psychological needs, ultimately contributing to their psychological well-being ([Deci and Ryan, 2000](#)). This study represents a significant addition to the growing literature concerning sport employee innovative behaviors, and the larger scope of sport organizational behavior. The value of this study is found in the focus on Millennial and Generation Z sport employees' willingness to engage with innovation and the utilization of contemporary constructs to gauge their experiences in the sport workplace. As these generations move into leadership positions within sport organizations, it is critical for sport organizations to acquire knowledge that supports their professional development to attain a competitive advantage ([Doherty, 1998](#); [Kim et al., 2019](#); [Schuetz et al., 2021](#)). Doing so can advance organizational functionality and result in improved experiences for sport participants and consumers ([Kim et al., 2023](#); [Oja et al., 2022](#)).

Literature review

Organizational behavior in contemporary sport

Sport organizations stand to benefit from hiring and developing employees that assist in achieving organizational effectiveness ([Doherty, 1998](#)). For this reason, sport management scholars have explored various topics to enhance the functionality of sport organizations including: job satisfaction ([Swanson and Kent, 2017](#)), turnover intentions ([Lee and Chelladurai, 2018](#)), job engagement ([Svensson et al., 2021](#)), job design ([Schuetz et al., 2022](#)), workplace passion ([Anagnostopoulos et al., 2016](#)), and creativity ([Smith and Green, 2020](#)). Recently, sport management scholars have considered psychological well-being of sport employees (e.g. [Kim et al., 2019](#); [Oja et al., 2020](#)). For example, [Dixon et al. \(2023\)](#) found that implementing management strategies (e.g. work-accommodator, spillover afflicted) allowed sport employees to mediate unresolved tensions and enhance their work-life balance.

Simultaneously, the emerging Fourth Industrial Revolution has created a shift for organizations worldwide through the change of technological, economic, and social systems in industry ([Dombrowski and Wagner, 2014](#)). To become more efficient in production and reach new markets, the [World Economic Forum \(2020\)](#) reported that organizations are seeking ways to incorporate emergent technologies. This is also pertinent in the sport industry as the lack of innovation from sport employees prevents sport organizations' ability to adapt technology, hampers the services offered, and limits organizational growth ([Winand et al., 2013](#)). Especially for Millennials and Generation Z, innovation skills are not only imperative for entering the job market but also essential for their individual development and positive work experiences ([Gong et al., 2018](#); [Pandita, 2022](#)).

Millennials and generation Z employees

Millennials soon to make up 75% of the workplace are multitaskers, open to change, and are highly driven by their personal values in the workplace ([Yap and Badri, 2020](#)). As this generation believes that they should "live for today," enjoying their work is of high importance ([Bencsik et al., 2016](#)). Unlike previous generations, Millennials change positions

when they feel that they are being held captive (Bencsik *et al.*, 2016), which could amplify the already high turnover issues in the sport industry.

Though Millennials and Generation Z possess similarities, Generation Z is characterized as employees who embrace team dynamics, prefer their organization to provide on-going feedback, and welcome creative ideas (Chillakuri, 2020; Goh and Okumus, 2020). Meanwhile, they are most likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, compared to previous generations such as Baby Boomers and Generation X employees (Schroth, 2019). The sport industry's hectic schedule and pressure from stakeholders can create a stressful work environment that affects employees' health (Taylor *et al.*, 2019). As such, the working environment in the sport industry could be problematic for supporting Millennial and Generation Z sport employee development.

For sport organizations to create a competitive advantage, one strategy is for employees to stay current on trends and explore their creative and innovative thoughts (Delshab *et al.*, 2022; Hoeber *et al.*, 2015). Because innovative work behaviors allow employees to implement new services, products, and systems, the sport industry can utilize employee innovation as a strategic tool to change how sport services are provided (Wemmer *et al.*, 2016). Relatedly, scholars have found evidence that increasing job engagement enhances sport employees' innovative work behaviors (Paek *et al.*, 2022).

Job engagement

Job engagement is defined as “the simultaneous employment and expression of a person's ‘preferred self’ in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performance” (Kahn, 1990, p. 700). This is characterized by being physically involved in task, cognitively focused and attentive, and emotionally connected to their work (Kahn, 1990). Scholars have found that organizations with highly engaged employees possess higher customer satisfaction, profitability, and productivity (Saks and Gruman, 2014).

Sport management research has begun to emphasize engagement to retain and motivate various populations such as student athletes (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2020), employees (e.g. Schuetz *et al.*, 2021), and referees (Kim *et al.*, 2021). As sport organizations seek to improve the quality of their services, sport management researchers have started to explore the development of managerial employees to assist in achieving these performance expectations (e.g. Paek *et al.*, 2022). To enhance sport employees' job engagement, it is important to consider not only the role of leadership (e.g. path-goal leadership; Schuetz *et al.*, 2021) but also employee attitudes (e.g. motivation; Svensson *et al.*, 2021). In an effort to better understand Millennial and Generation Z sport employees, we included relevant employee characteristics in modern society (i.e. creative self-efficacy and technology anxiety), sport employee identification, and organizational characteristics (i.e. innovative climate) as potential antecedents of sport employees' job engagement.

To better understand this process, we implement SDT (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000) which examines how employee's motivations impact their performance and well-being (Deci *et al.*, 2017). Focusing on employee development, we emphasize intrinsic motivation based on the need to fulfill the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2008). Workplace autonomy has been found to increase levels of creativity, performance, and initiative (Meyer and Gagne, 2008; Ryan and Deci, 2001). Relatedness and competency can be reinforced through job engagement by feeling connected to coworkers and attaining greater work-related skills (Meyer and Gagne, 2008). SDT grounds predictions on how basic psychological needs are met (i.e. sport employee's creative self-efficacy, technology anxiety, sport employee identification, innovation climate) and further impact job engagement, innovative work behaviors, career satisfaction, and psychological well-being.

Creative self-efficacy

In their pursuit to become competitive through innovative strategies, organizations have highlighted the role of creativity as it begins the innovation process (Serrat, 2017). A key factor for employees to exhibit creativity at work is their creative self-efficacy (Haase *et al.*, 2018). Creative self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in themselves to be creative (Tierney and Farmer, 2002). In the workplace, employees with high creative self-efficacy tend to develop creative goals, and display confidence in their creativity (Cai *et al.*, 2019).

Self-efficacy has been studied across different sport contexts such as sport for peace and development, sport officials, and youth sport (e.g. Lirgg *et al.*, 2016). However, in sport organizational settings, there have been limited studies that explore the concept of sport employees' creativity (e.g. Paek *et al.*, 2022; Smith and Green, 2020), especially concerning their creative self-efficacy. Regarding the relationship between creative self-efficacy and job engagement, Chen (2016) found that employees experiencing higher levels of creative self-efficacy are more likely to utilize creative cognitive processes. Self-motivated employees were more likely to generate feasible ideas, use available resources, and develop specific plans to meet their work demands (Chen, 2016). Essentially, those with creative self-efficacy are more engaged in their jobs because they are confident in their abilities to execute enhanced cognitive processes required to address workplace challenges. Furthermore, according to employee engagement theory (Kahn, 1990), sport employees that experience high levels of creative self-efficacy will fulfill their need for competence. Thus, they will feel more confident and generate more internal resources to achieve positive outcomes (Chiniara and Bentein, 2016). In view of this possibility, the following hypothesis has been developed.

- H1. Millennial and Generation Z sport employees' creative self-efficacy will positively influence their job engagement.

Technology anxiety

Individuals experience technology anxiety when feeling emotions such as nervousness, uncertainty, and fear when learning or utilizing technology (Troisi *et al.*, 2022). This could result from a lack of technological skills, or possessing low confidence in their ability to use technology (Troisi *et al.*, 2022). Technology anxiety is a key determinant in an individual's resistance and barrier to used technology, which could also lead to the rejection of technology altogether (Troisi *et al.*, 2022).

Sport management scholars have mainly explored sport consumers' technology usage and the intention to use innovative technology released by sport organizations such as team applications and social media (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2016). Kim *et al.* (2016) found that a significant determinant to use a sport team application was the consumer's perception of ease. Though there have been ample studies regarding sport consumer's technology anxiety, a small number of studies have addressed sport employees. Despite limited research in sport management, we expect technology anxiety to harm job engagement as experiencing negative affect (i.e. technology anxiety) does not promote a willingness to repeat the experience. Millennial and Generation Z sport employees who experience technology anxiety will be less likely to be engaged with all facets, including technological elements, of their jobs. In line with this reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis.

- H2. Millennial and Generation Z sport employee's technology anxiety will negatively influence job engagement.

Sport employee identification

Organizational identification has been explored in the field of management, and it has been considered as a critical factor for positive employee attitudes and behaviors (Kim *et al.*, 2017).

Oja *et al.* (2015) initially developed the concept of sport employee identification, which was later defined as “the psychological bond arising from an affinity for sport and a sense of oneness between sport employees and their parent organizations” (Oja *et al.*, 2020, p. 279). With strong sport identification, sport employees can experience enhanced psychological capital, and contribute to superior organizational performance (Kim *et al.*, 2017; Oja *et al.*, 2020). Employees that possess high levels of organizational identification tend to adopt their organization’s aims and goals. This results in the employees to be more energized and dedicated in the pursuit to achieve these goals and leads them to become more engaged in their work (Karanika-Murray *et al.*, 2015).

The power of social identification lies in the sense of oneness, which is derived when the traits of the group become self-defining (Pratt, 1998). When individuals identify with an organization, they perceive the self and organization to be analogous. This results in a willingness to partake in work-related activities and contribute significant mental energy to their work responsibilities, because those tasks have become emblematic of the individual and the organization (Kahn, 1990). Put differently, an identified sport employee is likely to want to engage in their jobs because it fulfills their sense of self (Pratt, 1998). According to SDT, individuals who feel connected to their coworkers are more likely to be active and present in their jobs (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Thus, we predict that Millennial and Generation Z sport employee identification will lead to higher job engagement. That leads us to have following hypothesis:

- H3. Sport employee identification among Millennial and Generation Z employees will positively impact job engagement.

Innovative climate

An innovative climate is defined as an organization’s supportive environment for employee innovation which sparks employee’s creativity and encourages them to take calculated risks (Shanker *et al.*, 2017). This environment can be strengthened through transformational leadership and complex task structures which allows employees to create and build ideas individually and with their co-workers (Newman *et al.*, 2020). For example, Ren and Zhang (2015) also found that employees within an innovative work climate experience an increase of innovative behaviors, which plays a crucial role in encouraging idea generation and implementation in the workplace.

Innovative climates within the sport organizational context have been mainly studied in nonprofit sport organizations (e.g. Delshab *et al.*, 2022; Winand and Anagnostopoulos, 2017). Delshab *et al.* (2022) explored knowledge management and innovative concepts (e.g. attitude toward innovation, open innovation, and innovativeness) influence on organizational performance. This study found that positive attitudes toward innovation mediated the relationship between knowledge management and innovativeness which assisted in enhanced organizational performance (Delshab *et al.*, 2022). Employees within an innovative climate are likely to be engaged with their work role and show high levels of job performance (Lee and Idris, 2017). Particularly, an innovative climate allows Millennial and Generation Z employees to feel supportive, valued, and safe in the workplace. This activates the employee’s motivation which results in stimulating their job engagement (Lee and Idris, 2017). In alignment with SDT, a climate fostering creativity helps employees meet their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs by nurturing competencies independently (Deci *et al.*, 2001). This motivation results in the employee’s willingness to be engaged in activities at work (Deci *et al.*, 2017). Correspondingly, the fourth hypothesis was formulated:

- H4. A supportive innovative climate will positively influence Millennial and Generation Z sport employees’ job engagement.

Innovative work behavior

Innovative work behavior is defined as the introduction and application of new ideas within a role, group, organization which benefits the performance of the individual in their role, the group, or organization (West and Farr, 1989). These behaviors are described through three elements: idea generation, idea promotion, and idea realization (Janssen, 2000). A lack of innovation from sport employees can limit organizations ability to utilize cutting edge technology and services (Winand *et al.*, 2013). Whereas employees working within an innovative climate often results in improved individual performance and organizational effectiveness (Shanker *et al.*, 2017).

Research regarding employee's innovation within the sport industry has explored employee's attitudes within non-profit sport organizations (Winand *et al.*, 2013; Winand and Anagnostopoulos, 2017; Delshab *et al.*, 2022). Winand and Anagnostopoulos (2017) discovered that sport employees' attitude toward newness impacts their innovativeness. As suggested by employee engagement theory, when employees are engrossed in their work, they channel their energies (i.e. cognitive, emotional, behavioral) to find novel solutions (Kahn, 1990; Svensson *et al.*, 2021). This encourages them to complete tasks outside of their roles (Afsar *et al.*, 2020) and with organizational problems (Amabile, 1988), which ultimately fosters innovative work behaviors. Further, a similar relationship has also been previously found among sport employees (Paek *et al.*, 2022). The fifth hypothesis is presented as follows:

- H5. Engaged Millennial and Generation Z sport employees are more likely to exhibit innovative work behaviors.

Career satisfaction

Career satisfaction is "positive psychological and work-related outcomes accumulated as a result of one's work experiences" (Seibert and Kraimer, 2001, p. 2). It is composed of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors of their careers such as their career goals, development of new skills, salary, and, advancement (Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel, 2009). When exploring career effectiveness, previous research has focused on objective career success (i.e. job performance) and career satisfaction. In other words, along with considering objective career success, it is import to focus on subjective career success (e.g. career satisfaction) where satisfaction is internal (Barnett and Bradley, 2007).

As the number of sport management programs continue to increase, it is important that to explore career satisfaction to prepare future sport employees (Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2017). Only few studies have examined the antecedents of career satisfaction (e.g. Cunningham *et al.*, 2005; Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2017). For example, Papadimitriou *et al.* (2017) found that job security mediates the relationship between harmonious passion and career satisfaction. When employees exhibit innovative behaviors at work, they develop proactive behaviors that result in being satisfied about their career (Wipulanusat *et al.*, 2018). The ability to be innovative at work enables employees to achieve their career goals which results in higher career satisfaction (Wipulanusat *et al.*, 2018). Based on this logic, the sixth hypothesis is:

- H6. Millennial and Generation Z sport employees that participate in innovative work behaviors will experience higher levels of career satisfaction.

Psychological well-being

Psychological well-being is defined as the overall effectiveness of an individual's psychological functioning (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Eudemonic well-being is characterized by the ideas of self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth (Ryff, 1995). The eudemonic form of well-being is often associated with psychological well-being, which can be improved in the workplace with supportive

organizational environments, job designs, personal characteristics (e.g. self-efficacy, competence; [Nielsen et al., 2017](#)) and job performance ([Wright and Cropanzano, 2000](#)).

Psychological well-being has gained traction within the field of sport management and more specifically among sport employees (e.g. [Kim et al., 2020, 2019, 2017](#)).

Notably, [Kim et al. \(2019\)](#) examined that meaningful work and a supportive organizational climate positively influenced sport employee's psychological capital, which resulted in higher levels of psychological well-being. The basis for the final hypothesis is that those who innovate and create new processes or products will experience various forms of autonomy and environmental mastery, which are core tenets of psychological well-being ([Ryff, 1995](#)). For example, when employees develop new ideas to solve challenges in their work roles, they experience higher levels of personal growth ([Rasulzada and Dackert, 2009](#)). Consequently, the final hypothesis is presented as follows.

- H7.* Millennial and Generation Z sport employees that participate in innovative work behaviors will experience higher levels of psychological well-being.

Methods

Procedures and participants

Data were collected from managerial sport employees of NCAA Division I institutions. We recruited participants from a convenience sampling procedure by emailing all eligible sport employees of selected collegiate sport organizations via their publicly displayed email addresses. The initial email provided the purpose and significance of the research, the timeframe, and a hyperlink to the online survey providing access to the consent form and questions. Two reminder emails were sent four days and then two weeks after the initial email. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

A total of 426 sport employees opened the survey, however, only 224 (52.6%) were valid for analysis. Sample size was deemed to be large enough to conduct structural equation modeling based on an item-to-response ratio of 1:5 recommendation ([Hair et al., 2018](#)). The sample contained 100 females (44.6%), 123 males (54.9%), and 1 (0.4%) who preferred not to disclose, in which 187 (83.5%) identified as White, 17 (7.6%) Black, 9 (4.0%) multiracial, 7 (3.1%) Asian, and 4 (4.8%) Hispanic. The work length ranged from 0.5 to 20 years ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 3.76$). The participants consisted of 41 (18.3%) Generation Z and 183 (81.7%) Millennials. Our sample is most likely majority Millennials as Generation Z is still entering the job market and several athletic departments are yet to update their directory with current accurate information. The sport employees worked in various departments such as ticketing, event operations, academic services, and marketing.

Survey instrument

The questionnaire consisted of measures for eight latent variables. These items were modified to provide context for a sport industry work environment. The four predictors of job engagement (i.e. technology anxiety, creative self-efficacy, innovative climate, sport employee identification) utilized a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

The survey contained four items that measured technology anxiety ([Ozdemir-Güngör and Camgöz-Akdağ, 2018](#)), a sample item was "using technology at work makes me worried." Three items measured creative self-efficacy ([Chong and Ma, 2010](#)), which included "I feel that I am good at generating novel ideas." Three items measured innovative climate ([Li et al., 2014](#)), and included "my organization encourages suggesting ideas for new opportunities." Eight items comprise the sport employee identification measure which includes four items from each dimension (i.e. collective enhancement and sport affinity; [Oja et al., 2020](#)). Sample item include "I consider athletics to be an important part of who I am." Five items adopted

from Saks (2006) were utilized to measure job engagement in which they were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Sample item is “I really ‘throw’ myself into my job.”

Nine items measured innovative work behavior related to the idea generation, idea promotion, and idea realization (Janssen, 2000). However, because of high intercorrelations over 0.79, the three dimensions were combined to measure innovative work behavior (Janssen, 2004). These items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = never to 7 = always) and include: “creating new ideas for difficult issues” and “mobilizing support for innovative ideas.” Five items were adopted from Hofmans *et al.* (2008) to measure career satisfaction. A sample statement from this measure is “I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career.” These items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). We utilized eight items from Villieux *et al.*’s (2016) Flourishing Scale to measure psychological well-being and chosen to measure psychological well-being because of its performance in previous sport management studies (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2019). Sample statements from this measure are “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life,” and “I am optimistic about my future.” These items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

Data analysis

We utilized structural equation modeling to assess latent variables. This process involved testing measurement models and then a structural model to examine the covariance structure among variables. Prior to examining the hypothesized model, we assessed the normality of the data using Mardia’s (1985) multivariate skewness (611.95, $p < 0.001$) and kurtosis (2199.58, $p < 0.001$). Hence, a robust maximum likelihood approach was used with Satorra and Bentler (1994) scaling method. As shown in Table 1, correlations among factors were calculated and confirmed that none of the relationships exceeded a correlation of 0.85 (Kline, 2005). A series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) was implemented to evaluate the measurement models. Composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and squared inter-construct correlation (SCI) values were used to assess convergent validity and discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Results

Measurement models

First, a CFA was conducted using Mplus 7.1 to assess the second-order measurement (i.e. sport employee identification). The result showed good model fit ($\chi^2=38.55$, $df=19$, $p < 0.005$,

Table 1.
Correlations among
latent variables

Constructs	1(1)	2(2)	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Technology anxiety	1.00							
2 Career self-efficacy	−0.24**	1.00						
3 Innovative climate	−0.12	0.25*	1.00					
4 Sport employee identification	−0.01	0.26**	0.45**	1.00				
(1) Sport affinity	1.00							
(2) Collective enhancement	0.59***	1.00						
5 Job engagement	−0.07	0.32***	0.50**	0.51**	1.00			
6 Innovative work behavior	−0.03	0.61***	0.32**	0.23**	0.38**	1.00		
7 Career satisfaction	0.01	0.35***	0.47**	0.37**	0.40**	0.28**	1.00	
8 Psychological well-being	−0.27***	0.59**	0.49**	0.41**	0.32**	0.31**	0.59**	1.00

Note(s): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
Source(s): Authors’ own creation

CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.06), and the values of CR and AVE exceeded the cutoff points (CR > 0.7, AVE > 0.5; [Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)). Second, we tested a full measurement model. The latent variables were reflexive, which means that each indicator does not independently represent the overall variable. Moreover, it is appropriate to remove indicators (i.e. items) that have poor factor loadings and have theoretical incongruences ([Hair et al., 2018](#)). We eliminated six items based on the reflective nature of the construct, poor statistical performance (i.e. <0.5 factor loadings), and potential wording issues (i.e. theoretical incongruences). Specifically, two items were reversed coded (i.e. one item from technology anxiety and one item from job engagement), which are often problematic. Two items from sport employee identification were removed. One item implied that participants may have been former athletes and the other referred to athletics as opposed to sport which could have been too vague. Lastly, two items were removed from the innovative work behavior construct. Both removed items did not involve actions, like the other items, and instead referred to ideas and generating ideas. The modified measurement model showed an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 1144.24$, $df = 673$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.06). Each items' factor loading surpassed the requirement of 0.50 ([Hair et al., 2018](#)), and all the CR and AVE values exceed the suggested the cutoff thresholds of 0.7 and 0.5, with a range of 0.78–0.92 and 0.53 to 0.79, respectively ([Table 2](#)). To provide further support for discriminant validity for the measurement model, SCI values were compared with AVE values for the respective latent constructs. We found that the AVE values were higher than SIC values for each construct, confirming the discriminant validity in the measurement model ([Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)).

Hypotheses testing

To validate the research hypotheses, a structural equation model was utilized including seven direct paths (See [Figure 1](#)). The results showed an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 1188.28$, $df = 678$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.06). The individual standardized path coefficients among the variables were calculated. The path from creative self-efficacy ($\gamma = 0.27$, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.001$), sport employee identification ($\gamma = 0.36$, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.001$), and innovative climate ($\gamma = 0.27$, SE = 0.07, $p < 0.01$) to job engagement was positive and significant, reflecting support for [Hypotheses 1, 3, and 4](#). However, the remaining predictor of job engagement, which was technology anxiety ($\gamma = 0.06$, SE = 0.44, $p = 0.38$) was found to be non-significant, and fails to support [Hypothesis 2](#). The path from job engagement to innovative work behavior was positive and significant ($\gamma = 0.40$, SE = 0.11, $p < 0.001$) and reflects support for [Hypothesis 5](#). Specifically, the direct effect of job engagement accounted for 47% of the variance in innovative work behavior. The paths from innovative work

Constructs	Mean	SD	CR	AVE
1 Technology anxiety	2.45	1.27	0.92	0.79
2 Career self-efficacy	5.27	0.92	0.80	0.57
3 Innovative climate	4.56	1.29	0.78	0.55
4 Sport employee identification			0.88	0.56
(1) Sport affinity	5.10	1.67	0.89	0.67
(2) Collective enhancement	4.96	1.44	0.90	0.70
5 Job engagement	3.83	0.58	0.82	0.53
6 Innovative work behavior	4.59	0.95	0.92	0.63
7 Career satisfaction	3.34	0.85	0.89	0.62
8 Psychological well-being	5.61	0.97	0.91	0.56

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 2.
Constructs, means, SD,
CR and AVE

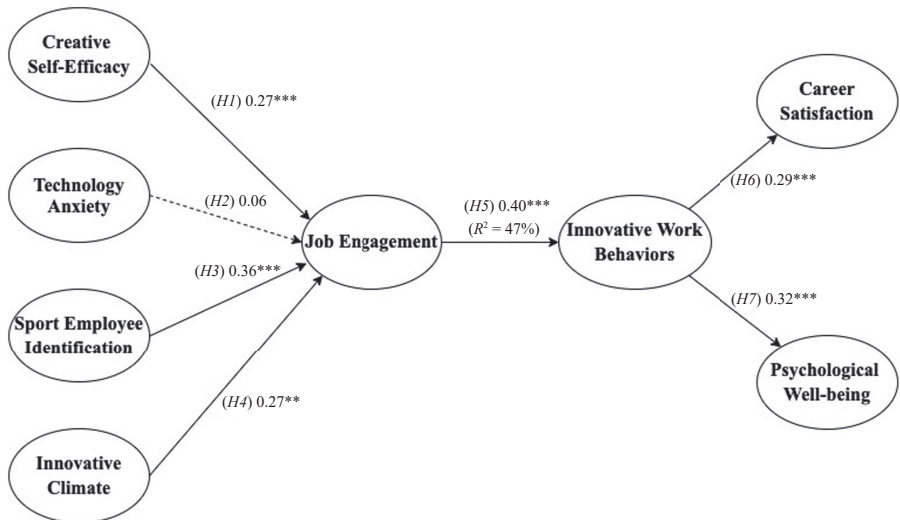


Figure 1.
Final research model

Note(s): ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
Source(s): Authors' own creation

behavior to career satisfaction ($\gamma = 0.29$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$) and psychological well-being ($\gamma = 0.32$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$) were positive and significant, reflecting support for [Hypotheses 6](#) and [7](#).

Discussion

In summary, our findings indicate that increases in Millennial and Generation Z sport employee creative self-efficacy, sport employee identification, and support for an innovative climate enhances job engagement, which leads to innovative work behaviors. These innovative work behaviors then produce higher career satisfaction and psychological well-being among the newer generations of sport employees. The results of this research provide evidence that all hypotheses, except for the second hypothesis, were supported. Contrary to our prediction, Millennial and Generation Z sport employee's technology anxiety did not significantly influence job engagement ([H2](#)). Based on the results, we identified the significant factors leading to engagement in the workplace as Millennial and Generation Z sport employees' confidence in their creative ability ([H1](#)), identification with their sport organization ([H3](#)), and experiencing a supportive climate for innovation ([H4](#)). Further, our findings include Millennial and Generation Z sport employees' job engagement enhancing innovative work behaviors ([H5](#)), which resulted in higher career satisfaction ([H6](#)) and psychological well-being ([H7](#)).

Theoretical advancement

Despite the failure of [H2](#), our other hypotheses were supported. We proposed and confirmed that both creative self-efficacy ([H1](#)) and sport employee identification ([H3](#)) positively influenced the job engagement of Millennial and Generation Z sport employees. The [H1](#) result reveals that believing one is capable of being creative can spur a willingness to engage in a job in sport. This finding extends [Paek et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Smith and Green \(2020\)](#) by emphasizing

the creative belief systems of sport employees. The result also signifies the importance of having confidence in oneself (Chen, 2016) and the resulting influence on engagement. The same is true of identifying with a sport organization (H3), as sensing oneness with a sport organization propels one to be an active participant therein (Kahn, 1990; Pratt, 1998). While past studies have noted the potential value of sport employee identification (e.g. Oja *et al.*, 2015, 2020), this study demonstrates its value by substantiating the empirical relationship between sport employee identification and job engagement. These findings signify the significant impact that self-held beliefs have on a sport employees' willingness to engage in their jobs.

We also found the relationship between innovative climate and job engagement (H4) to be significant. This finding demonstrates that when Millennial and Generation Z sport employees feel that their organization supports them being innovative it leads to engagement in their work. This expands the utility of sport leaders' support for innovation (e.g. Delshab *et al.*, 2022; Winand and Anagnostopoulos, 2017) by demonstrating its positive impact on job engagement. Resultantly, sport managers who value innovation and support their employees' attempts at innovation are likely to realize greater engagement from their Millennial and Generation Z employees. Our results follow SDT (Deci and Ryan, 2000), in that when participants identified with their sport organization, believed in their creative abilities, and were supported in their creative ventures they were better positioned to engage in their jobs because their basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy were met.

The results of the study also included a positive relationship between job engagement and innovative work behaviors. This finding is similar to Paek *et al.*'s (2022) results concerning sport employees' job engagement and creativity but advances the literature by using the context of Millennial and Generation Z employees. Moreover, this study builds on Svensson *et al.*'s (2021) work by providing additional evidence that engagement is a critical feature in sport organizations, as job engagement could potentially begin the process of fostering employee innovations.

Lastly, we examined the influence of innovative work behaviors on Millennial and Generation Z sport employees' career satisfaction and psychological well-being. The analysis of data indicated that both relationships were significant. This is an important discovery as it demonstrates the importance of innovation in the sport workplace and extends its application from outcomes such as organizational performance (e.g. Delshab *et al.*, 2022) to the realm of sport employee well-being and career satisfaction. More specifically, creativity and innovation represent a valuable asset for sport organizations (Girginov *et al.*, 2015; Hoerber *et al.*, 2015; Smith and Green, 2020; Wemmer *et al.*, 2016), and this study highlights additional advantages of innovation in sport organizations as it supports Millennial and Generation Z sport employees' career satisfaction and psychological well-being. As such, this study extends previous literature in the sport management discipline as it establishes a link between sport employee innovation and their psychological experiences, which strengthens the value of innovation in the sport workplace.

This study offers several theoretical advancements for the field of sport management. First, theoretically we broaden the understanding of Millennial and Generation Z as sport employees and additional factors that assist these employees' experiences and performance in the workplace. The existing literature has focused on these generations involvement as athletes (Gould *et al.*, 2020) and sport tourism (Corbisiero and Ruspini, 2018) with a limited emphasis on their experiences as sport employees. More so, this study contributes to the wider literature concerning human capital development in sport organizations (e.g. Delshab *et al.*, 2022; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Oja *et al.*, 2020) by underscoring the value of the younger generations of sport employees. In doing so, we expanded the theoretical boundaries of

various factors that are specific to Millennial and Generation Z sport employees' engagement, innovative work behaviors, career satisfaction, and psychological well-being.

Second, this study advances the understanding of innovation and engagement in the sport workplace. Generating innovations in response to organizational problems or challenges are viewed as a necessary initiative for sport organizations to survive their environments (Girginov *et al.*, 2015; Hoerber *et al.*, 2015). Thus, it is imperative for sport organizations to develop innovative sport employees to support their survival, as doing so is likely to enhance the organizational performance (Delshab *et al.*, 2022; Winand *et al.*, 2013). Beyond the general implications of successful innovations in sport organizations, Millennial and Generation Z sport employees are likely to be at the forefront of innovation given their propensity to engage in new endeavors (Bencsik *et al.*, 2016; Chillakuri, 2020). Moreover, these sport employees have a significant impact on organizational functioning from their current roles (i.e. entry-level; Weight *et al.*, 2021) and are considered the future of the sport industry who will soon hold key decision-making roles in sport organizations. Consequently, examining the factors that support the younger sport employee generations' innovative work behaviors, as well as the outcomes of their behaviors, particularly relevant given the likelihood of their willingness to engage in innovative activities when compared to their older counterparts and their future roles in guiding sport organizations. As such, this study uniquely contributes to the literature pertaining to sport organizational innovation (e.g. Delshab *et al.*, 2022; Hoerber and Hoerber, 2012) by exploring the experiences of those most likely to have pro-innovation values (i.e. Millennial and Generation Z sport employees; Bencsik *et al.*, 2016).

The results of the study indicate that Millennial and Generation Z sport employees are more likely to participate in innovative work behaviors when they are engaged in their jobs, and their job engagement is enhanced when they believe in their creative self-efficacy, identify with their sport organization, and feel their innovation activities are supported by their leaders. This study also signifies the importance of job engagement in producing innovative work behaviors and builds off the work of Svensson *et al.* (2021) by examining how the engagement and innovative work behaviors relationship is formed among Millennial and Generation Z employees.

Third, this study contributes to the literature by examining the positive impact of innovative work behaviors on sport employees' career satisfaction and psychological well-being. The finding that innovative work behaviors positively influence sport employees' career satisfaction and psychological well-being advances the body of knowledge on sport organizational behavior. Previous organizational behavior studies in sport have centered on sport employees' psychological capital and its impact on psychological well-being (e.g. Kim *et al.*, 2019; Oja *et al.*, 2020); whereas we emphasized characteristics that sport employees exhibit solely in the workplace (e.g. innovate work behaviors). This framework provides empirical evidence that expands our understanding and alternative methods to increase the psychological well-being and career satisfaction of sport employees. In sum, this study offers a more complete understanding of Millennial and Generation Z sport employees, the value of engagement and innovation in the sport workplace, and additional mechanisms to promote psychological well-being and career satisfaction among Millennial and Generation Z sport employees.

Practical implications

The findings of this study provide several implications for practitioners in the sport industry. This work can provide sport managers with impactful strategies for their Millennial and Generation Z sport employees. As these two populations' desires differ from Generation X and Baby Boomers, it is crucial that sport managers engage their employees differently to

influence their performance. Thus, it will be valuable for sport leaders to foster Millennial and Generation Z sport employee creative self-efficacy by maintaining an innovative climate. Research has shown that managers play a critical role in developing self-efficacy in employees (Eden, 1992). As a result, managers can enhance employee's creative self-efficacy by offering alternative job duties, or providing job rotation opportunities as task-specific training gradually increases creative self-efficacy (Tierney and Farmer, 2011). Sport managers could incorporate innovative work behaviors when evaluating and rewarding employees as this might alter the employee's position which might change their behavior (Barnhill and Smith, 2019). Additionally, sport managers could provide employees the flexibility to use creative problem solving without the fear of facing consequences so that they can build confidence in their creativity (Tierney and Farmer, 2011). Furthermore, organizations can develop an innovative climate through the composition of team members (He *et al.*, 2019). To achieve this, sport managers can intermingle employees with various levels of creative self-efficacy (i.e. low and high), or skilled in creativity and innovation which facilitates innovation among the team (He *et al.*, 2019).

We found job engagement to be a central pathway to innovative work behaviors of sport employees. In this regard, the findings provide sport managers with new ways to manage their Millennial and Generation Z employees. For example, sport managers can cater to their employees' creative self-efficacy and sport employee identification by encouraging their employees to develop new ideas and highlighting the successes of the organization. From a broader perspective, the results of the study provide avenues for practitioners to build a sustainable competitive advantage via sport employee human capital (Oja *et al.*, 2022). That is, providing sufficient resources to develop the human capital of sport employees is likely to have a positive influence on sport organizational performance (Delshab *et al.*, 2022; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Svensson *et al.*, 2021). This study informs that investing in the development of Millennial and Generation Z sport employees' capacity to engage and innovate within their jobs is likely to produce positive outcomes for sport organizations and employees.

Limitations and future direction

The limitations for this study include combining both the Millennial and Generation Z groups and the discrepancy in participation. While these generations do represent the future of the sport workplace, they also have different experiences and backgrounds. Within the sample, there are notably more Millennial participants, but this is not unexpected as Generation Z individuals are still making their way into the industry. Regardless, the discrepancy in representation can still be considered a limitation. However, this limitation presents the possibility of future studies that examine the differences between these groups. To best determine these differences, qualitative approaches may yield a more complete understanding of how generational background impacts the willingness to engage at work and subsequently take part in innovative behaviors. Such a study could also examine other generations such as Gen X and Baby Boomers. This data could then be used to better inform future quantitative studies in terms of design (e.g. moderators) and outcomes to garner valuable information concerning generational perspectives in sport organizations. An additional limitation would be the convenience sampling method utilized in this study. This limitation harms the generalization of our study to all NCAA institutions as every type of athletic department was not represented within our sample (i.e. Division II, Historically Black Colleges and Universities).

As sport practitioners and scholars begin to navigate a post COVID-19 world, human resource practices will gain further significance as individuals have reassessed their career and life goals (i.e. The Great Resignation). This study offers a unique perspective of how generations experience critical variables in the post COVID-19 sport workplace. Future

studies can be crafted to explore how generational perspectives influence organizational performance and perhaps more importantly how sport organizations are designed—or redesigned—to meet the changing needs of future dominant generations. The sport industry will be faced with significant turnover as the Baby Boomer and Gen X generations move towards retirement and the Millennial and Generation Z groups move into the workplace. Thus, it will be essential to further explore how sport organizations can change to better fit the perspectives of younger generations while still maintaining organizational efficiency and functionality. Examining job designs and their preparedness for the changing of the guard would be advantageous, as would examining how autonomous sport employees are to manage their job tasks as well as perform innovations.

Conclusion

Amid the Fourth Industrial Revolution, innovative behaviors from employees have become a key factor in developing a competitive advantage for organizations. In response to the need to better understand innovation in the sport workplace, we developed and tested a model for Millennial and Generation Z employees in collegiate athletics departments. Creative self-efficacy, sport employee identification, and innovative climate served as predictors of job engagement, which increased innovative work behaviors. From there, innovative work behaviors increased both career satisfaction and psychological well-being. This study provides a foundation to promote innovative behaviors in the sport workplace and a better understanding of additional methods to support the development of Millennial and Generation Z sport employees.

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