

Exclusive talent management, employee engagement and interpersonal conflict: Evidence from Kenyan banks

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Orientation: Employee engagement is widely recognised as a driver of positive workplace relations, yet its potential to buffer the adverse effects of exclusive talent management practices remains underexplored, particularly in African contexts.

Research purpose: This study examines whether employee engagement moderates the relationship between exclusive talent management and interpersonal conflict among employees in Kenya's banking sector.

Motivation for the study: While prior research links exclusivity to organisational tensions, limited evidence exists on the mechanisms through which engagement shapes such dynamics in developing economies. This study integrates Social Exchange Theory and Conflict Theory to explain how engagement may influence conflict under perceived inequity.

Research approach/design and method: A cross-sectional survey design was used, involving 399 bank employees, 66 of whom worked in institutions implementing exclusive talent management practices. Data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling.

Main findings: Exclusive talent management significantly increased interpersonal conflict, reflecting its divisive effects. Although employee engagement was negatively associated with conflict, its moderating effect on the exclusivity-conflict relationship was not significant, indicating that engagement alone cannot offset the structural inequities inherent in exclusive systems.

Practical/managerial implications: Banks should complement elite development with inclusive engagement strategies that promote fairness and relational harmony.

Contribution/value-add: The study extends global and African talent management scholarship by showing that engagement functions more as an independent predictor of harmony than as a moderating force in exclusive environments.

Keywords: banking sector; conflict theory; employee engagement; exclusive talent management approach; interpersonal conflict; social exchange theory.

Introduction

In today's dynamic business environment, globalisation, technological change and shifting demographics have intensified competition and complexity for organisations, requiring adaptive human resource management approaches (Kaur, 2024). Recent trends of deglobalisation and reshoring have also begun to reshape supply chains and workforce strategies, influencing how organisations plan, attract and deploy talent (D'Ambrosio & Lavoratori, 2025; Lamperti et al., 2025). In response, talent management (TM) has emerged as a significant strategic priority, focusing on attracting, developing and retaining the workforce needed to drive success (Collings et al., 2019; Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020). Talent management is defined as a structured process of attracting, identifying, developing, engaging, retaining and deploying employees who drive organisational success (Collings et al., 2019).

Despite its strategic prominence, TM is increasingly recognised as a distinct field, with growing consensus on its core objectives; however, it remains unevenly applied across organisations, and debates continue regarding its boundaries, beneficiaries and practical implementation (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2020; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). These conceptual tensions have led to divergent interpretations of who qualifies as 'talent', how talent should be identified, and whether TM

should serve organisational or employee-centric objectives. Critics argue that many TM systems privilege managerial elites or high performers, thereby failing to account for systemic issues such as inclusion, fairness and interpersonal dynamics (McDonnell et al., 2023). Recent contributions further illuminate these gaps: Sinisterra et al. (2024) highlighted global links between TM, engagement and performance but did not explore interpersonal conflict and non-Western contexts; Akter (2022) examined engagement in African public institutions but treated it primarily as an outcome rather than a potential moderator of relational tensions; and Alimansyah and Takahashi (2023) examined how perceived organisational justice in talent selection and appraisal practices affects employee outcomes, yet did not link this explicitly to exclusive TM practices. This theoretical fragmentation underscores the need for a more critical appraisal of TM philosophies before determining their strategic orientation.

Organisations adopt different TM philosophies, typically classified as exclusive (targeting high-potential employees), inclusive (providing opportunities for all employees) or hybrid (combining elements of both) (Anlesinya et al., 2019). Each approach carries distinct implications for employee development, engagement and organisational culture. The debate between exclusive and inclusive TM thus reflects broader tensions between efficiency-driven and equity-driven models of people management, with consequences for employee morale, cooperation and organisational justice perceptions.

While TM is critical across sectors, the banking industry faces unique pressures from rapid digital transformation, stringent regulatory requirements and heightened competition, all of which reshape operating models, service delivery and talent needs (Ali Alqararah et al., 2025). Effective TM is particularly essential for securing specialised skills – such as data analytics, cybersecurity and software development – that underpin innovation and service delivery (Shukla & Nayak, 2016; Thanh et al., 2020). In Kenya, the banking sector serves as a key driver of economic growth, making the adoption of well-aligned TM approaches vital for sustaining competitiveness and sectoral stability (Central Bank of Kenya [CBK], 2022).

Existing studies have demonstrated that exclusive TM approaches – where only a small proportion of employees are identified as ‘high-potential’ – can create perceptions of unfairness, foster workplace tensions and escalate interpersonal conflict (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; McDonnell et al., 2023; Van Zelder et al., 2023). Such approaches have been linked to competitive behaviours, hostility and reduced cooperation, particularly when selection criteria are opaque or preferential treatment is perceived. In this regard, Sinisterra et al. (2024), Akter (2022), and Alimansyah and Takahashi (2023) provide complementary perspectives, demonstrating the global significance of TM and engagement, while highlighting that interpersonal conflict and relational outcomes remain underexamined in non-Western, emerging-market contexts.

Conversely, employee engagement has been shown to mitigate these adverse effects by fostering collaboration, enhancing commitment, and buffering the negative social consequences of exclusive talent categorisation (Hughes & Rog, 2008; Theodorsson et al., 2022).

However, little is known about how these dynamics unfold in emerging-market contexts such as Kenya, where cultural norms, labour market structures and organisational practices may produce different patterns of conflict. While prior research has examined the link between TM and interpersonal conflict in developed economies, few studies have quantitatively investigated the role of employee engagement as a moderator in this relationship – particularly in the banking sector of a developing economy. By addressing these gaps, this study builds on the insights of Sinisterra et al. (2024), Akter (2022), and Alimansyah and Takahashi (2023), situating the analysis in an African banking sector context where exclusivity, engagement and perceptions of fairness intersect in shaping employee outcomes.

This study aims to address these identified gaps by exploring the relationship between exclusive TM approaches and interpersonal conflict in Kenya’s banking sector, while examining the moderating role of employee engagement. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory and Conflict Theory, the study tests whether engagement can buffer the conflict-inducing effects of exclusive TM, thereby contributing to both theory and practice in human resource management. By focusing on a developing economy, this study may contribute empirical insights that extend TM and engagement theories to non-Western contexts and emerging markets. The findings could offer practical guidance for banking sector leaders seeking to design engagement-driven talent strategies that minimise interpersonal tensions and foster a more cohesive workforce in competitive and rapidly changing markets.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: the theoretical foundation and hypothesis development are presented first, followed by methodology, results, and finally discussion and conclusion.

Literature review and theoretical foundation

The current study draws on Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961) and Conflict Theory (Coser, 1967; Marx, 1973) to explain how exclusive TM practices influence employee interpersonal conflict, and how employee engagement may moderate this relationship. By combining these complementary perspectives, the study provides a nuanced understanding of organisational dynamics in contexts characterised by resource competition, hierarchical differentiation and workforce interdependence.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory, initially proposed by Homans (1961) and Blau (1964), posits that social relationships and

interactions are governed by reciprocal exchanges, where individuals evaluate the costs and benefits of their engagements. Key principles include the norm of reciprocity, the drive to maximise rewards and minimise costs, and the expectation that positive past exchanges foster trust and cooperation while negative exchanges breed mistrust and conflict (Gouldner, 1960; Molm et al., 1999). In organisational contexts, SET is particularly relevant for understanding TM, as employees perceive investments in their development – such as training opportunities, promotions and inclusion in high-potential programmes – as social and economic rewards, which they reciprocate through commitment, engagement and cooperative behaviour.

Exclusive TM approaches, which target a small subset of high-potential employees, inherently challenge these reciprocal dynamics. Employees excluded from the talent pool may perceive the exchange as inequitable, experiencing demotivation, resentment or disengagement. Conversely, employees designated as talent may experience anxiety or uncertainty regarding their status if selection criteria are opaque (McDonnell et al., 2023; Van Zelderen et al., 2023). Social Exchange Theory therefore predicts that perceptions of unfairness within TM practices can strain social exchanges, reduce trust, psychological safety, and collaboration, and ultimately trigger interpersonal conflict.

Recent developments, however, caution that classical SET often overlooks structural power asymmetries, cultural variations and identity-based interpretations of fairness (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Contemporary research reframes SET not merely as a reciprocal exchange mechanism but as a broader framework encompassing psychological contract fulfilment, organisational justice and inclusion dynamics. In exclusive TM systems, these dimensions are especially salient because perceptions of breach or exclusion can signal unequal social value and status differentiation, undermining reciprocity and cohesion.

Employee engagement – defined as the cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment employees make in their work (Saks, 2022) – can enhance the positive effects of social exchange by strengthening employees' commitment to organisational goals and shared purpose. Highly engaged employees are more likely to focus on productive collaboration and less on status differentials or perceived inequities, potentially buffering the conflict-inducing effects of exclusive TM. From a social exchange perspective, engagement operates as a resource that helps employees reinterpret perceived inequities and sustain cooperative relationships even when organisational exchanges are imbalanced.

Conflict Theory

While SET emphasises cooperation and reciprocity, Conflict Theory provides a complementary lens to understand the relational tensions generated by exclusive TM. Originating from Marx (1973) and extended by scholars such as

Coser (1967) and Dahrendorf (1958), Conflict Theory asserts that competition over scarce resources – such as promotions, recognition or career development opportunities – inevitably generates interpersonal tensions. Organisational conflicts arise when employees perceive inequitable distribution of these resources, particularly in environments where hierarchical differentiation and exclusivity exist (Bagshaw, 1998; Thomas, 1992).

Contemporary developments in conflict theory have expanded its scope beyond structural inequities to include micro-level and identity-based processes. Modern conflict theorists distinguish between task, relationship and status conflicts (De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001), and emphasise how social identity, emotional contagion and perceived injustice amplify or mitigate conflict (Turner et al., 1979). Within TM contexts, exclusivity creates status hierarchies and symbolic resource divisions that can activate these mechanisms – transforming instrumental competition for opportunities into affective conflict driven by envy, insecurity or perceived disrespect. Conflict Theory thus explains how privileging a select group of employees for talent development can heighten perceptions of inequity and provoke interpersonal disputes among employees, undermining collaboration and team cohesion. In emerging-market settings such as Kenya, collectivist norms and interdependence may intensify sensitivity to fairness, making exclusive TM particularly conflict-prone unless mitigated by strong engagement and transparent communication.

Social Exchange Theory and Conflict Theory offer complementary insights into the dynamics of exclusive TM, interpersonal conflict and employee engagement. Social Exchange Theory emphasises the role of perceived fairness and reciprocal benefits in fostering cooperative and positive interactions, while Conflict Theory highlights how competition over limited organisational resources generates tensions and disputes. Integrating these theories provides a richer explanatory model: exclusive TM can create asymmetric exchanges (SET) and visible status differentials (Conflict Theory), both of which fuel interpersonal conflict. Employee engagement functions as a moderating resource that promotes reciprocity, shared identity and emotional regulation, thereby weakening the link between exclusivity and conflict.

In practical terms, this integrated framework suggests that when engagement is high, employees may perceive exclusive TM not solely as a source of inequity but as an opportunity for personal growth within a broader collective mission, reducing conflict intensity. Conversely, low engagement may amplify the negative consequences of perceived unfairness, leading to higher interpersonal conflict. This dual-theoretical lens therefore extends classical formulations by incorporating contemporary insights on power, justice and identity, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the relational and behavioural implications of exclusive TM in Kenya's banking sector.

Exclusive talent management approach

Exclusive TM designates a small subset of employees – typically high-potential or high-performing individuals – as ‘talent’ and prioritises their development over the broader workforce. Kamoche and Leigh (2022) examined this approach in Hong Kong, showing how an elitist identity discourse shaped TM practices, including unique titles, superior training and preferential treatment for management trainees (MTs). Similarly, Dang et al. (2020) found that private banks in Vietnam implemented exclusive TM by offering challenging assignments and leadership development programmes to select employees, whereas public banks adopted more inclusive HRM-oriented practices. These studies demonstrate that even when labelled ‘exclusive’, TM can manifest differently across organisations, influenced by sectoral and cultural contexts. However, both cases highlight the potential for exclusivity to create perceptions of inequity and workforce segmentation, sowing seeds for tension and rivalry among employees.

Recent scholarship provides further perspective. Sinisterra et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review linking TM to engagement and performance but noted that most studies remain conceptual and Western-centric. Their work does not differentiate between exclusive and inclusive TM, thereby overlooking how exclusivity might shape employee relations. This study extends their framework by empirically testing the interpersonal consequences of exclusivity in a developing-country context.

Exclusive talent management approach and employee interpersonal conflict

The consequences of exclusive TM have been widely documented across organisational contexts. Theodorsson et al. (2022), through a PRISMA-guided systematic review of TM practices in banking from 2000 to 2021, found that exclusive approaches – assigning only the top 1% – 15% of employees as high-potential – consistently generate organisational tensions. Employees excluded from the talent category frequently experience demotivation and perceive unfairness, increasing the likelihood of interpersonal conflict. In contrast, inclusive TM approaches that recognise and develop the potential of all employees have been shown to enhance perceptions of fairness, foster team cohesion and reduce conflict (Meyers & Van Woerkom, 2014).

Existing research consistently highlights that exclusive TM approaches can create fractures within the workforce, but the evidence also reveals important gaps and contradictions that this study seeks to address. For instance, McDonnell et al. (2023), drawing on interviews with HR leaders, managers and employees across large organisations, demonstrate that a lack of transparency in talent identification erodes trust and fosters interpersonal tension. Yet, their reliance on qualitative perspectives means that while the mechanisms of perceived inequity are richly described, the magnitude and variability of conflict outcomes remain untested. This underscores the need for quantitative evidence, especially in environments

undergoing systemic change, such as Kenya’s banking sector, where regulatory reforms and rapid digitalisation may amplify fairness concerns.

Experimental research by Van Zelderen et al. (2023) advances this discussion by showing, through controlled vignette studies, that exclusivity fosters social categorisation between talent and non-talent employees. However, while their findings compellingly establish causal mechanisms, the European context constrains their applicability. In collectivist societies such as Kenya, where social cohesion is highly valued, perceived exclusion may trigger not only resentment but also culturally specific conflict behaviours such as withdrawal or subtle forms of resistance. Thus, the very dynamic they document may play out differently in banking workplaces shaped by communal norms and intense competition for scarce skills.

Similarly, evidence from Asia reinforces the interpersonal risks of exclusivity. Son et al. (2020) illustrate how categorising employees by strategic value undermines cooperation, while Kamoche and Leigh (2022) highlight the passive-aggressive behaviours of non-talent employees in response to preferential treatment. Yet, these studies tend to privilege managerial or ‘talent’ perspectives, underplaying the voices of those most likely to feel marginalised. Moreover, they treat interpersonal conflict as a by-product rather than a central outcome of exclusivity. This represents a critical gap: if conflict is consistently emerging across contexts, it warrants direct theorisation and empirical testing, not secondary treatment.

Akter (2022) makes an important contribution by advancing understanding of inclusive TM and its link with employee engagement in African public institutions. The study broadens the TM discourse beyond Western contexts and underscores the value of inclusivity in emerging economies. However, its descriptive cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation, and it does not account for interpersonal dynamics or conflict outcomes that may arise from TM practices. Moreover, engagement is conceptualised solely as an outcome rather than a potential moderating mechanism influencing workplace relationships. These limitations highlight the need for further empirical investigation – such as the present study – which examines how exclusive TM interacts with engagement to influence interpersonal conflict in Kenya’s banking sector.

Collectively, the literature establishes that exclusive TM creates conditions ripe for conflict but stops short of fully explaining how and under what circumstances these dynamics are most acute. This study addresses these limitations by situating the analysis in Kenya’s banking sector – a context where collectivist cultural norms, rapid technological disruption and regulatory scrutiny converge to heighten sensitivity to fairness and resource distribution. In doing so, it foregrounds interpersonal conflict not as a secondary issue, but as a central organisational challenge shaped by TM practices.

Employee engagement as a moderator

Employee engagement – the cognitive, emotional and behavioural commitment employees display towards their work – has been widely recognised as a mechanism that strengthens organisational resilience and buffers against negative dynamics (Saks, 2022). Yet, while the literature consistently depicts engagement as beneficial, the pathways through which it interacts with other HR practices, particularly exclusive TM, remain underexplored. Bolanle et al. (2022), studying Nigeria's insurance sector, highlight that effective conflict management strengthens engagement, implying that reducing interpersonal tensions fosters stronger employee commitment. Although their work does not address TM directly, it suggests that engagement is shaped by the degree to which employees perceive their social environment as fair and cooperative. This insight is highly relevant to exclusive TM contexts.

A more explicit case for engagement's buffering role emerges in Obuobisa-Darko and Sokro's (2023) study of Ghana's public sector. They found that engagement dampened the link between pandemic-related psychological strain and turnover intentions, suggesting that engagement can serve as a protective resource under conditions of stress and inequity. By analogy, the exclusivity inherent in TM practices can be viewed as a 'chronic stressor' that triggers perceptions of inequity and exclusion. Engagement may therefore operate as a moderator, shielding employees from translating these perceptions into interpersonal conflict.

Recent evidence underscores this view as Salunkhe et al. (2024) demonstrated that human resource practices such as career development, training and rewards significantly enhance employee engagement through psychological empowerment. Their findings emphasise engagement as a psychological mechanism linking HR practices to positive outcomes and mitigating negative workplace experiences. Applied to the current study, this suggests that when employees feel empowered and valued, engagement may reduce conflict arising from perceived exclusivity. However, the moderating effect is likely constrained by fairness perceptions – if exclusivity is seen as unjust, engagement alone may be insufficient to neutralise its divisive effects.

Nonetheless, prior African studies have not directly connected engagement to the interpersonal consequences of exclusive TM. Bolanle et al. (2022) focus on conflict management rather than TM, while Obuobisa-Darko and Sokro (2023) emphasise turnover rather than relational tensions. This leaves open critical questions: Does engagement mitigate or amplify the divisive effects of exclusivity? Are these dynamics context-specific, shaped by institutional and cultural factors? This study addresses these questions within Kenya's banking sector – an environment characterised by digital transformation, competition for scarce skills and regulatory scrutiny, all of which heighten the salience of fairness and recognition.

Additionally, Alimansyah and Takahashi (2023) examined perceived organisational justice and talent retention in Southeast Asia, identifying fairness as a determinant of employee outcomes. However, they treated TM as a uniform construct, overlooking how exclusive versus inclusive approaches trigger distinct social exchanges. By addressing this limitation, the current study extends justice-based perspectives to examine how engagement moderates the relationship between exclusivity and conflict within an African context.

By examining employee engagement as a moderator, this study extends African scholarship that has largely treated engagement as an outcome rather than a boundary condition and contributes to the broader global TM literature by providing empirical evidence on how engagement interacts with exclusive TM practices. It also answers Anlesinya et al.'s (2019) call for deeper theorisation of moderating mechanisms in TM-outcome relationships. In doing so, it positions engagement not simply as a positive individual resource but as a relational force capable of reshaping how exclusivity is experienced and enacted in workplace interactions across diverse cultural and organisational contexts.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1:** Exclusive talent management approach positively influences employee interpersonal conflict.
- **H2:** Employee engagement moderates the relationship between exclusive talent management approach and employee interpersonal conflict, such that higher engagement weakens the positive association.

The conceptual framework of the study is presented in Figure 1.

Research methods and design

This section outlines the research methodology employed to investigate the relationship between exclusive TM and employee interpersonal conflict, as well as the moderating role of employee engagement in Kenya's banking sector. It covers study design, population, sampling, data collection, variable measurement and analysis techniques.

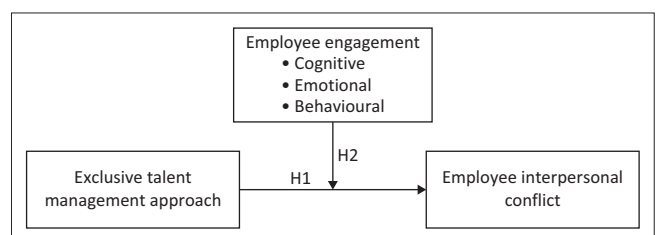


FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework illustrating the hypothesised direct relationship between exclusive talent management and employee interpersonal conflict (H1), and the moderating role of employee engagement – conceptualised as cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement – on this relationship (H2).

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics for bank characteristics.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Bank tier	Tier 1	262	65.7
	Tier 2	74	18.5
	Tier 3	63	15.8
	Total	399	100.0
Duration of bank existence in years	Under 10	11	2.8
	11–20	43	10.8
	21–30	29	7.3
	31–40	58	14.5
	Over 40	258	64.7
	Total	399	100.0
Number of bank branches	Below 10	14	3.5
	10–20	48	12.0
	21–30	48	12.0
	31–40	10	2.5
	Above 40	279	69.9
	Total	399	100.0
Ownership of the bank	The State	13	3.3
	Privately owned	310	77.7
	Both the state and privately owned	76	19.0
	Total	399	100.0
Branches outside Kenya	Yes	298	74.7
	No	101	25.3
	Total	399	100.0
Talent management approach	Exclusive	66	16.5
	Inclusive	162	40.6
	Hybrid	171	42.9
	Total	399	100.0

Study design

This study was grounded in a positivist research paradigm, supported by a realist ontology and an objectivist epistemology. The positivist approach was considered appropriate because it emphasises objective measurement, statistical testing and theory-driven inquiry (Creswell, 2012; Saunders et al., 2019). Consistent with this paradigm, the study was guided by established theories, from which hypotheses were derived and tested using empirical data. Data were collected through structured surveys, enabling the quantitative examination of relationships among the independent, dependent and moderating variables. The positivist design is well-aligned with prior research on TM and organisational behaviour, which similarly relied on quantitative methodologies to test hypothesised associations (Bolanle et al., 2022; Obuobisa-Darko & Sokro, 2023).

Population and sample

The study targeted employees from 38 licensed commercial banks in Kenya, as recognised by the CBK. The banking sector was selected because of its critical role in financial intermediation, technological change and talent competition. Stratified and simple random sampling was employed. Banks were divided into three tiers based on the CBK Weighted Composite Index (WCI). A target of 456 employees was proportionally selected across tiers.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed and deployed using KoboToolbox. The instrument

TABLE 2: Employee interpersonal conflict under exclusive approach.

Code	Statement (N = 66)	Mean	SD
Con_15	I believe conflict in the organisation can lead to low employee productivity.	4.18	1.080
Con_12	I have observed tension among employees because of differences in salary in my organisation.	3.85	1.167
Con_09	In my organisation, some employees are assigned important roles and position.	3.73	1.117
Con_01	There seems to be competition for promotions between 'talented' and 'non-talented' employees in my organisation.	3.71	1.120
Con_10	Some employees are assigned unique titles such as high-potential or high performers in my organisation.	3.65	1.157
Con_13	Certain employees may exhibit passive-aggressive behaviour towards their 'talented' colleagues in my organisation.	3.64	1.047
Con_05	I have noticed a sense of tension and hostility among 'talented' and 'non-talented' employees in my organisation.	3.62	1.212
Con_08	I have noticed some employees are favoured when it comes to training and development opportunities in my organisation.	3.62	1.286
Con_11	I have observed hostility among employees because of differences in workload in my organisation.	3.62	1.160
Con_07	I observe jealousy and envy among employees towards their 'talented' colleagues.	3.59	1.163
Con_06	It seems to take longer for 'non-talented' employees to move up the ranks in my organisation.	3.53	1.231
Con_03	There seems to be conflicting interests and values between 'talented' and 'non-talented' employees in my organisation.	3.45	1.218
Con_04	I have noticed a passive-aggressive behaviour among 'talented' and 'non-talented' employees in my organisation.	3.45	1.126
Con_02	I observe a lack of cooperation between 'talented' and 'non-talented' employees in my organisation.	3.41	1.215
Con_14	I try to stay away from the organisation whenever there is conflict.	3.33	1.340
Overall	-	3.63	1.176

SD, standard deviation.

was distributed electronically to employees in 38 commercial banks through relationship and branch managers using email and WhatsApp, as researchers were not granted direct access to employee contacts because of data privacy regulations. Stratified random sampling ensured representation across bank size, departments and seniority levels. A total of 399 valid responses were obtained (87.5% response rate), of which 66 participants indicated that their banks practised an exclusive TM approach, forming the focal group for hypothesis testing.

Measurement of variables

Three constructs were measured: exclusive TM (independent), employee interpersonal conflict (dependent) and employee engagement (moderator). Exclusive TM was operationalised using items capturing talent identification and selective development practices, adapted from prior empirical studies on exclusive TM (Dang et al., 2020; Kamoche & Leigh, 2022; Sumelius et al., 2020). Employee interpersonal conflict was measured using 15 items reflecting behavioural, emotional and cognitive manifestations of conflict, drawing on established conflict literature (Marx, 1973; Remi, 2018; Thomas, 1992). Employee engagement was measured with 12 items capturing cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement, adapted from validated engagement scales (Shuck et al., 2017). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). All measurement items were adapted to the study

context and assessed for reliability and validity using factor loadings, internal consistency measures and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) prior to hypothesis testing.

Data analysis techniques

Analysis followed three stages. Firstly, descriptive statistics were generated. Secondly, reliability and validity were assessed using IBM SPSS Statistics (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) and SmartPLS 4 (SmartPLS GmbH, Oststeinbek, Germany). Thirdly, hypothesis testing was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling was selected because the study is prediction-oriented and seeks to examine complex relationships involving a moderating effect among latent constructs. Compared to covariance-based SEM, PLS-SEM is well suited for exploratory and theory-extending research, particularly when the primary objective is to explain variance in key outcome variables rather than to confirm an established theory (Henseler et al., 2015). In addition, PLS-SEM is appropriate for subgroup analyses and does not impose strict assumptions regarding multivariate normality (Hair et al., 2019). Given that hypothesis testing focused on a subgroup of employees working in banks implementing exclusive TM practices, PLS-SEM provided a robust analytical approach for estimating path coefficients and interaction effects.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from Strathmore University and Strathmore University Ethics Review Committee Board (No. [SU-ISERC2119/24.]).

Results

Descriptive analysis of the 399 observations indicates that most banks were Tier 1 (65.7%), followed by Tier 2 (18.5%) and Tier 3 (15.8%) (Table 1). Most banks (64.7%) had operated for over 40 years, and large branch networks were common (69.9%). Ownership was predominantly private (77.7%), with 19% mixed ownership and only 3.3% state-owned institutions. The majority of banks (74.7%) operated international branches. Hybrid approach (42.9%) and inclusive approach (40.6%) were the most common, while the exclusive approach was the least adopted (16.5%).

Summary of employee perceptions of the exclusive talent management approach

The results for the exclusive TM approach indicated a moderate level of implementation across participating banks (3.53, $SD = 1.23$). Respondents agreed most strongly that training activities for identified talent require substantial time and financial resources ($M = 3.73$), and that their organisations identify talented employees who make the greatest impact on success ($M = 3.68$). Moderate agreement was also noted regarding the identification of critical positions aligned with business strategy ($M = 3.58$) and the existence of talent pools for high-performing

employees ($M = 3.52$). However, perceptions were less positive concerning the fairness of reward systems for talented employees ($M = 3.29$).

Employee conflict averaged 3.63 ($SD = 1.18$), with the highest observed for low productivity because of conflict ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.08$), and tensions arising from salary differentials ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.17$) (Table 2). Items reflecting competition between 'talented' and 'non-talented' employees – such as for promotions, roles or recognition – also scored above the midpoint (M range = 3.42–3.73), suggesting that exclusivity in TM contributes to tensions.

Summary of employee engagement under exclusive talent approach

The descriptive results for employee engagement under the exclusive TM approach indicated generally high levels of engagement among respondents (overall mean = 3.86, $SD = 1.14$). Employees reported being highly focused on their work ($M = 4.12$) and paying close attention to their job responsibilities ($M = 4.06$), while also demonstrating a willingness to go beyond expectations to support their teams and organisation ($M = 3.76$ – 3.94). Commitment to the organisation's mission and a sense of belonging were moderate ($M = 3.58$ – 3.74), and respondents perceived their work as personally meaningful ($M = 3.61$). Despite these positive perceptions, employee engagement did not exhibit a statistically significant moderating effect in the subsequent analyses.

Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using SmartPLS (version 4.0) to assess construct reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity and collinearity.

Table 3 presents the measurement model results. All factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70,

TABLE 3: Measurement model assessment.

Constructs and items	Factor loadings	VIF	Composite reliability	Cronbach's Alpha value	Average variance extracted
Employee interpersonal conflict			0.925	0.905	0.638
CON_02	0.758	2.040	-	-	-
CON_05	0.809	2.642	-	-	-
CON_07	0.855	2.888	-	-	-
CON_08	0.858	2.568	-	-	-
CON_09	0.768	2.152	-	-	-
CON_10	0.718	1.807	-	-	-
CON_13	0.816	2.486	-	-	-
Exclusive talent approach			0.725	0.719	0.570
EXC_04	0.815	1.021	-	-	-
EXC_05	0.701	1.021	-	-	-
Employee engagement			0.906	0.880	0.659
ENG_03	0.721	1.930	-	-	-
ENG_05	0.849	1.931	-	-	-
ENG_08	0.862	1.991	-	-	-
ENG_09	0.787	2.261	-	-	-
ENG_12	0.829	2.491	-	-	-

VIF, variance inflation factor.

confirming strong indicator reliability (Hair et al., 2019). Variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below the critical value of 3.0, indicating that multicollinearity among indicators was not a concern (Kock, 2015). Composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, demonstrating internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019; Thorndike, 1995). Average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50, establishing convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Overall, the constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity.

Table 4 presents the discriminant validity results using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios. The square roots of the AVE for each construct (e.g. Conflict = 0.799; Engagement = 0.812; Exclusive TM = 0.755) exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations, satisfying the Fornell-Larcker test. All HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015), confirming discriminant validity across constructs.

Structural model

After confirming measurement validity, the structural model was assessed using bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples.

The exclusive TM approach showed a positive and statistically significant relationship with employees' interpersonal conflict ($\beta = 0.214, p < 0.01$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1 (Figure 2).

The direct path of exclusive TM on interpersonal conflict remained positive and significant ($\beta = 0.193, p < 0.01$), while employee engagement had a negative and significant effect on interpersonal conflict ($\beta = -0.223, p < 0.01$) (Table 5). However, the interaction term between employee engagement and exclusive TM was non-significant ($\beta = 0.020, p = 0.725$), indicating that employee engagement did not moderate the relationship. These results suggest that while engagement independently reduces interpersonal conflict, it does not buffer the conflict-inducing effects of exclusive TM practices.

Discussion and practical implications

This study set out to examine the relationship between exclusive TM approaches and employee interpersonal conflict in Kenya's banking sector, while also assessing the moderating role of employee engagement. The findings provide important insights into how TM practices shape employee dynamics in emerging contexts. Consistent with prior research (Dries & De Gieter, 2014; Son et al., 2020; Theodorsson et al., 2022), exclusive TM significantly

increased interpersonal conflict. The regression results ($\beta = 0.193, p < 0.001$) confirm that privileging a small group of 'high-potential' employees can foster divisions, resentment and competition. Van Zelderen et al. (2023) illustrated in European contexts how exclusivity produces segmentation between 'talent' and 'non-talent', while Kamoche and Leigh (2022) showed that in Asian settings, preferential treatment generated passive-aggressive resistance.

The current study extends this evidence to Africa by demonstrating that exclusivity generates interpersonal tensions even in collectivist contexts such as Kenya, where fairness, inclusion and group harmony are highly valued. In collectivist cultures, employees tend to evaluate organisational practices through a relational lens, placing greater weight on procedural fairness, respect and the maintenance of social cohesion than on individual outcomes alone. When exclusive TM practices are perceived to violate these shared norms – by privileging a select group or disrupting relational balance – conflict may manifest in subtle, indirect or relational forms rather than overt confrontation. This contrasts with many Western contexts, where individual achievement and merit-based differentiation are more readily accepted, and conflict may be expressed more directly. Accordingly, the finding that exclusivity heightens conflict in Kenya is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests that collectivist norms may amplify sensitivity to perceived unfairness rather than buffer its interpersonal consequences (Hofstede, 2001).

Furthermore, the study builds on the conceptual insights of Sinisterra et al. (2024), who highlighted global links between TM, engagement, and performance but did not focus on interpersonal conflict and non-Western contexts. The present findings provide distinctive empirical evidence that the social consequences of exclusive TM are tangible, manifesting as observable conflict in African banking institutions – an aspect previously underexplored. This underscores the unique contribution and contextual importance of our study.

While employee engagement was negatively associated with interpersonal conflict (Salunkhe et al., 2024), its moderating effect on the relationship between exclusive TM and conflict was not statistically significant. This finding suggests that engagement alone may be insufficient to offset the structural and relational tensions embedded in exclusive TM approaches. From an SET perspective, engagement is expected to foster reciprocity and cooperative behaviours; however, when organisational practices are perceived as fundamentally inequitable, the capacity for reciprocal

TABLE 4: Discriminant validity – Fornell-Larcker.

Construct	Conflict	Engagement	Exclusive
Conflict	0.799	-	-
Engagement	-0.237 (0.218)	0.812	-
Exclusive	0.209 (0.437)	-0.069 (0.147)	0.755

Note: Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) values are enclosed in parenthesis.

TABLE 5: Moderation of employees' engagement on the relationship.

Relationship	Path coefficient	SD	T statistics	p-value
Exclusive -> Conflict	0.193*	0.048	3.994	0.000
Engagement -> Conflict	-0.223*	0.043	5.217	0.000
Engagement × Exclusive -> Conflict	0.020	0.058	0.352	0.725

SD, standard deviation.

*, denotes level of significance at 1%.

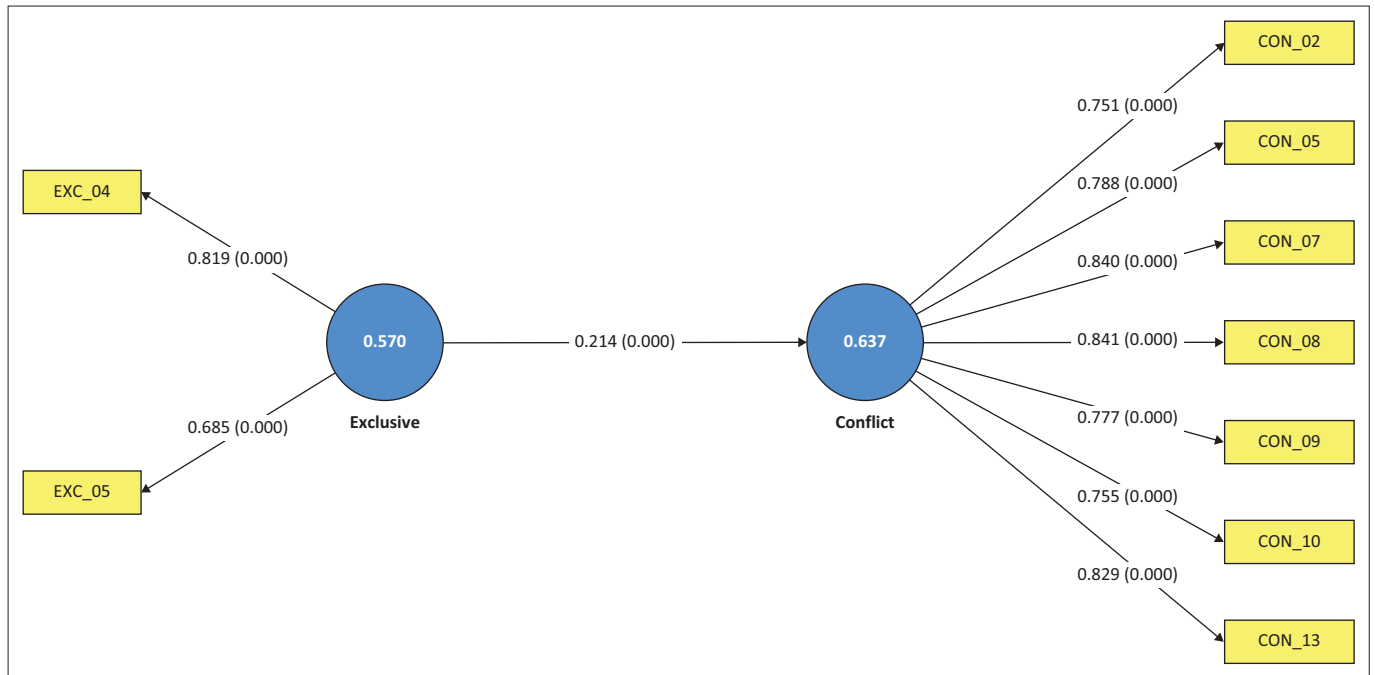


FIGURE 2: Structural model (direct path).

exchange is constrained. In exclusive TM contexts, employees who are excluded from talent pools may interpret engagement initiatives as symbolic rather than substantive, limiting their ability to neutralise perceptions of unfairness and status differentiation.

Insights from organisational justice theory further illuminate this dynamic by emphasising employees' evaluations of distributive, procedural and interactional fairness in organisational practices (Colquitt, 2001). In exclusive TM systems, perceptions that talent identification and development processes are unfair, opaque or biased can intensify negative emotional responses and undermine the effectiveness of engagement initiatives. When justice concerns remain unresolved, engagement efforts may be perceived as insufficient or misaligned, thereby weakening their potential to buffer interpersonal conflict.

Conflict Theory further explains this outcome by highlighting how competition over scarce and unevenly distributed organisational resources – such as promotions, recognition and development opportunities – generates persistent interpersonal tensions. Even highly engaged employees remain embedded within hierarchical structures that privilege a select group, making engagement an individual-level resource that cannot fully counteract system-level inequities. In collectivist contexts such as Kenya, where fairness, inclusion and group harmony are strongly valued, perceived exclusion may intensify rather than diminish relational strain, thereby weakening the buffering role of engagement.

Taken together, these findings indicate that employee engagement functions more effectively as an independent predictor of reduced conflict rather than as a boundary

condition capable of moderating the conflict-inducing effects of exclusive TM. This suggests that, in the absence of complementary fairness-oriented and transparent talent practices, engagement initiatives alone are unlikely to mitigate interpersonal conflict in exclusive systems. Unlike in inclusive HR contexts, where engagement may buffer negative workplace dynamics, the present findings suggest that justice perceptions play a critical role in determining whether engagement can translate into relational harmony. In this sense, the 'bright side' of engagement (Saks, 2022) is overshadowed by the 'dark side' of exclusivity when resource allocation is highly asymmetrical. This insight extends Social Exchange and Conflict Theory (Blau, 1964; Mack & Snyder, 1957; Marx, 1973), by demonstrating that the moderating capacity of engagement is contextually bounded rather than universally protective, an insight that may surprise scholars who expect engagement to consistently mitigate negative workplace outcomes.

The results also resonate with Akter (2022), who demonstrated engagement as a positive outcome in African public institutions. The novelty here lies in showing that, under exclusive TM systems, engagement does not function as a buffering mechanism against interpersonal conflict – highlighting an unexpected boundary condition of engagement in emerging-country contexts. This challenges prior assumptions regarding the universal effectiveness of engagement and underscores the importance of contextual and structural factors in shaping its relational impact.

Theoretically, these findings challenge a straightforward application of SET (Blau, 1964), which predicts that engaged employees reciprocate employer investment with positive behaviours. Instead, the study reveals that when engagement

exists within systems perceived as inequitable, reciprocity is weakened. Even motivated employees struggle to reconcile their commitment with perceptions of favouritism and exclusion, uncovering a compelling and unanticipated disconnect between engagement and positive relational outcomes. This insight adds nuance to prior African scholarship on TM and engagement (Anlesinya et al., 2019; Obuobisa-Darko & Sokro, 2023), and contributes to global TM literature by showing that engagement's buffering potential is context-dependent, constrained by exclusivity and fairness perceptions.

Moreover, these findings extend Alimansyah and Takahashi (2023), who emphasised the role of perceived organisational justice in shaping employee outcomes. The current study demonstrates that fairness perceptions are critical in determining whether engagement can mitigate interpersonal tensions, providing a fresh empirical link between justice, exclusive TM, and relational conflict in African workplaces. This insight offers both theoretical and practical value by highlighting justice as a key boundary condition in TM-engagement-conflict relationships, which is an important nuance for practitioners and scholars alike.

Beyond theoretical contributions, the study has clear practical implications. Banks face a paradox: exclusive TM can accelerate the development of high-potential employees, yet it risks eroding interpersonal trust, collaboration and overall workforce cohesion. High levels of engagement, while beneficial, cannot fully compensate for these tensions. To address this challenge, bank managers should adopt clearly articulated hybrid TM strategies that combine targeted investment in critical roles with organisation-wide development opportunities.

Specifically, transparent selection criteria should be established and communicated in advance, including explicit performance indicators, skill requirements and progression pathways, to reduce perceptions of favouritism. Talent identification decisions should be accompanied by clear feedback mechanisms that explain selection outcomes and outline development options for non-selected employees.

In addition, inclusive engagement programmes – such as cross-functional project, mentoring schemes and access to learning platforms – should be extended beyond designated talent pools to reinforce perceptions of fairness and collective contribution. Regular communication forums and leadership-led dialogue can further help align talent practices with shared organisational values, particularly in collectivist contexts where relational harmony is highly valued.

These findings signal to managers that balancing efficiency in talent investment with fairness-oriented implementation is essential to sustaining positive employee relations while fostering critical talent, representing a novel and empirically grounded managerial challenge highlighted by our results.

Limitations and future research

The study acknowledges several limitations that open avenues for further inquiry. Firstly, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; longitudinal research could clarify whether observed conflicts are transient or enduring and examine how the effects of exclusivity evolve over time.

Secondly, although the sample included employees from banks practising TM, the subgroup ($n = 66$) was relatively modest. While statistically adequate, this limits the detailed exploration of experiences within exclusive systems. Future research could adopt multi-site case studies or larger samples to examine how individual, team or organisational factors shape responses to exclusivity.

Thirdly, reliance on quantitative measures may not fully capture employees' nuanced perceptions. Mixed-methods design, incorporating interviews or focus groups, could unpack mechanisms – such as perceived transparency, trust in management and interpretations of fairness – through which exclusivity translates into interpersonal conflict.

Finally, the study primarily draws on SET and Conflict Theory. Future research could incorporate alternative theoretical frameworks, such as Social Identity Theory, to explain variations in conflict outcomes under exclusive TM practices and to examine whether employee engagement moderates these relationships differently across cultural, organisational or sectoral contexts. To guide future studies, researchers could ask: How do employees' perceptions of fairness, transparency and trust influence the interpersonal consequences of exclusive TM over time? Do these dynamics differ across cultural, organisational or sectoral contexts, particularly in emerging markets? How do alternative theoretical lenses (e.g. Social Identity Theory, Psychological Contract Theory) explain variations in conflict under exclusive TM? Addressing these questions would enhance understanding of exclusive TM's impact and inform more equitable and effective TM strategies.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on TM and organisational conflict by empirically examining how exclusive TM approaches influence interpersonal relationships in Kenya's banking sector. The findings confirm that exclusivity significantly heightens interpersonal conflict, echoing concerns raised in prior research across European and Asian contexts. Importantly, this study extends existing knowledge by situating the analysis in a non-Western, collectivist context, addressing gaps identified by Sinisterra et al. (2024), Akter (2022), and Alimansyah and Takahashi (2023).

While employee engagement independently reduces conflict, it surprisingly does not significantly moderate the exclusivity-conflict relationship. Theoretically, the study advances both SET and Conflict Theory by showing that while reciprocity fosters cooperation in fair systems,

structural inequities inherent in exclusivity override these positive dynamics. This offers a novel insight into the boundary conditions of engagement, particularly in emerging-market contexts, where perceptions of fairness critically shape relational outcomes.

Practically, it offers banking leaders a cautionary note, namely: engagement alone cannot safeguard workplace harmony if TM practices are perceived as unfair. Instead, strategic interventions such as transparent talent selection, fair communication of opportunities and hybrid approaches combining exclusive and inclusive elements are necessary to reconcile talent development goals with collaborative and trust-based workplace cultures.

In summary, this study highlights the dual-edged nature of exclusivity in TM: it develops elite talent but risks fragmenting the broader workforce. Future research should continue to explore TM strategies across diverse cultural, institutional and sectoral contexts, employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the complex interplay between TM, engagement, fairness and interpersonal conflict. Such work will be critical in advancing a more holistic understanding of how TM strategies shape the social fabric of organisations globally.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Lydia M. Nthei: Writing – original draft. Ken Kamoche: Supervision. Hellen N. Otieno: Supervision. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

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

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