The Viability of Employee Engagement Approach During Covid-19 Pandemic Among Academics in Malaysian Private Higher Educational Institutions: A Literature Review

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Abstract. The Covid-19 epidemic has compelled higher education institutions to adapt to numerous quick advances in order to replace conventional face-to-face sessions. Various worries have been expressed by educational institutions all around the world, particularly about the influence of academics in surviving the epidemic. This study's primary purpose is to ascertain the mediating role of psychological empowerment, in the relationships between perceived organizational support, job characteristics, and skill utilization on employee engagement of academics in the Malaysian Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs) during Covid-19 pandemic. The result of this study may contribute to the importance of the specific explanations that are required to be performed by academics and its respective Malaysian PHEIs in executing their responsibilities to its environment.

Keywords: employee engagement · psychological empowerment · perceived organizational support · job characteristics · skill utilization

1   Introduction

Employee engagement has developed as an important concept among organisations in recent years, guiding human resource consultants, managers, and practitioners in organisation including in the commercial world. Within the organisation, the human resource department plays an important role in recruiting, developing, engaging and retaining key employees to remain competitive within their respective industries (Daud, 2016). Even though the concept of employee engagement has been discussed for the past decade, employee engagement surveys among most corporations still continue to show a decline in engagement levels among employees worldwide (Kuok & Taormina, 2017).

There are various factors associated with the mixed result in 2020 especially with the COVID-19 pandemic in the background, the decrease of international trades and many more. Based on the result, it indicates that global employers should consider the matter as crucial, and strategies should be designed and implemented to improve employee

engagement in the future. According to Choo (2020), around 54% of employees in Malaysia were actively engaged to their organisation compared to the result in 2017. The result shows that Malaysia's engagement level decreased from 63% in 2018 to 54% in 2020. The Qualtrics Report by Choo (2020) also indicates that engagement drivers change over time and it reflects that organisations must identify the current needs of its employees and act swiftly on what is important to the development of their respective employees.

In Malaysia, the government has introduced the Federal Public Servant Engagement Index in 2015 and 2018 reveals the overall level of actively engaged among public servant in Malaysia. According to the Public Service Department (2018) report, the objectives is to measure the success rate among public servant and at the same time achieving one of the main focus areas in 11th Malaysian Plan. The main focus of FPSEI is to ensure that the engagement index among public servant is increased from 69.8% to at least 75% in the year 2020 (Public Service Department, 2018). There is a total of 262,251 respondents among 25 ministries who participated in the study, and it represents around 89.1% of total population among public servant employees in Malaysia. The FPSEI index that has been conducted through time-series approach allows the findings to be compared between 2015 and 2018 which shows an important indicator for every ministry and department in terms of their efficiency and effectiveness of their services and crucial steps to be taken by relevant ministry or department in addressing the engagement strategies on every employee.

Even though human resource professional believe that employee engagement is important, the issue has not been addressed sufficiently due to rapid changes on organisational practices (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Majority of past research reported that more that than a third of HR managers saw engagement as an important issue (Botelho, Powell, Kincaid, & Wang, 2017; Li et al., 2018; Malinowska, Tokarz, & Wardzichowska, 2018). However, most organisation did not have solid employee engagement strategies (Kidane & Xuefeng, 2021) since concentration seems to be biased to financial outcomes. It is evident that a low level of employee engagement has been a concern over the years and this holds for employers in Malaysia (Abdullah, Ismail, Alnoor, & Yaqoub, 2021). High turnover rate coupled with high turnover cost will eventually force all organisations to increase their interest in engaging their employees.

In the context of higher learning education institutions, Heng, Hamid, & Khan (2020) noted that there are some concerns raised by academics who are teaching in higher learning institutions where they were constantly burdened with delivering lecture in class and increasing administration duties (Abu Bakar & Zuriyati Mohamad, 2015). The statement was also supported by Noor Hassim Ismail & Arma Noor (2016), whereby academics in Malaysia are in taxing condition especially in achieving their KPIs and balancing their core tasks in teaching, research and administrations work. Such concerns can be expected which lead to low level of engagement among academics (Côté, Lauzier, & Stinglhamber, 2020). Tauhed, Rasdi, Samah, & Ibrahim (2018) noted that studies in exploring the influence of organisational factors especially on the level of employee engagement especially in the educational industry in Malaysia are still scarce as most past works of literature on engagement were concentrated on western countries. Additionally, the motivation to boost PHEIs global ranking puts a strain on academics in

terms of bureaucratization and work-life balance, resulting in an alarming high rate of academic turnover in PHEIs (Abdulrab, Zumrah, Almaamari, & Al-Tahitah, 2017). According to Muda & Fook (2020), academics in Malaysia are not fully empowered and they are under much greater pressure to succeed in order to compete with other PHEIs.

Table 1 presents the distribution of all PHEIs by region all across Malaysia. Data are compiled based on the Department of Higher Education in 2018 and were arranged according to the southern, central, northern, eastern region including Sabah and Sarawak. There is a total of 467 PHEIs all across Malaysia with the highest population of PHEIs are concentrated in the central region of the country. Zooming down to the areas concerned with this study, 53 private universities are actively operating in Malaysia with the highest concentration located in the central region whereby there are 36 PHEIs (Ministry of Higher Education, 2018b).

According to Ofoegbu & Nwadiani (2006), higher educational institutions in Malaysia plays a significant role in shaping future leaders and currently are transforming into a complex enterprise. These complexities demand academics that possessed a high degree of competency in addressing the future needs of the industry. Not only that even the entire academic and non-academic staffs who are working in every university must possess the traits. Universities by their nature are a centre of knowledge and skilled intellectuals whereby organisations are constantly referred to them for new knowledge and theories (Ofoegbu & Nwadiani, 2006). It serves as an incubator of knowledge that nurtures the future needs of industries for the nation and thus lifting the standard of mankind and society. In meeting the above standard, universities must engage with academics that can ensure the university can meet their educational goals and objectives. The number of high-quality academics that a certain university can employ, the more visibility of a certain university can be enhancing in the future.

Table 1. Private Higher Education Institutions Statistics until 31 July 2018

Zone	State	PU	PUC	FSU	Colleges	Total
Southern Region	Johor	1	2	3	22	**28**
	Melaka	1	2	-	14	**17**
	Negeri Sembilan	3	2	-	16	**21**
Central Region	Selangor	22	9	3	100	**134**
	Kuala Lumpur	13	7	-	84	**104**
	Putrajaya	1	-	1	-	**2**
Northern Region	Kedah	3	-	-	6	**9**
	Perak	4	1	-	17	**22**
	Perlis	-	1	-	2	**3**
	Pulau Pinang	1	4	1	26	**32**
Eastern Region	Kelantan	-	2	-	11	**13**
	Pahang	2	3	-	10	**14**
	Terengganu	1	2	-	9	**12**

Table 1. (*continued*)

Zone	State	PU	PUC	FSU	Colleges	Total
Sabah		-	2	-	24	**26**
Sarawak		1	1	2	25	**29**
TOTAL		**53**lePara>	**38**	**10**	**366**	**467**

Source: Ministry of Higher Education (2018)

Legend:
PU: Private Universities
PUC: Private University College
FSU: Foreign Satellite Universities

2   Literature Review

2.1   Social Exchange Theory and Engagement

An empirical understanding of the social exchange can be traced back to 1920s whereby society is being transformed by exchanging ideas and criticisms to a certain perspective in life (Malinowska et al., 2018). Blau (1964) who is considered as one of the most influential figures, introduced SET from a psychological perspective and he contended that social exchange is a result of similarities between one person to another. In social exchange theory perspective, employees will be interested and motivated to work if they are treated properly and equitably.

By understanding the perspectives of SET, employees can enhance their work productivity and at the same time trust and understanding are built between human interactions in the organisation. The theory implies that employees should be treated well so that it can enhance their performance towards the organisation. Furthermore, an employee are able to increase their work efforts once they have successfully interacts with other individuals in the organisation Brown, Treviño, & Harrison (2005) and willing to become more engaged to their work (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Niamul & Muhammad (2020) who used SET as the foundation for their research among 113 officers in Bangladesh's banking industry discovered that when employees perceive that their organisation and its management treat them fairly and equitably, they will feel obligated to return the favour with a positive work attitude such as engaging back to the organisation.

Thi, Nguyen, & Phan (2021) noted that when an employees have positive thoughts of their organisation, this will increase their level of commitment if they believe that their contributions to the organisation are well-recognized and the organisation appreciates and acknowledges the efforts. However, social exchange theory is not without critiques. For example, Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels, & Hall (2017) criticised social exchange theory for a lack of theoretical clarity within the social exchange family model owing to overlapping variables and inaccurate behavioural predictions. Based on the above discussions, it is concluded that the definition of engagement in academic perspective is unique and different from other sectors, particularly in research and publication achievements. The evolution of the above discussions of employee engagement are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Outcomes on Employee Engagement

Author(s)	Measurements	Findings
Kahn (1990)	14-item scale, interview, and observation	• Psychological safety partially mediates job enrichment • Psychological meaningfulness was strongly related to engagement.
Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes (2002)	Gallup Workplace Audit	• A significant relationship between satisfaction/engagement towards 5 business unit outcomes.
May, Gilson, & Harter (2004)	13-item scale	• Role fit, job enrichment, supportive supervision, rewards and resources support to engagement.
Schaufeli & Bakker (2004)	"UWES & MBI-GS"	• Engagement did not predict to burnout. • Job resources predict engagement
Saks (2006)	6-item scale each for job and organisation engagement	• Differences between job and organisation engagement. • Both mediates between antecedents and consequences of engagement
Koyuncu, Burke, & Fiksenbaum (2006)	Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)	• Control, rewards and recognition, value-fit, satisfaction, psychological well-being predicted on engagement. • The engagement did not predict individual characteristics.
Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli (2009)	Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9)	• Workplace resources and engagement is mediated by self-efficacy, self-esteem, and optimism.
Rich, Lepine, & Crawford (2010)	Job Engagement Scale (JES)	• Engagement exceeds job involvement, job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation on Kahn (1990) definition of engagement.

(*continued*)

Table 2. (*continued*)

Author(s)	Measurements	Findings
James, Mckechnie, & Swanberg (2011)	8-item scale by CitiSales	• Cognitive, emotional and behavioural predicted by engagement
Lee & Ok (2015)	9-item by Utrecht Work Engagement (UWES)	• Information and communication, managerial support, locus of control supported engagement.
Poulsen, Khan, Poulsen, Khan, & Poulsen (2016)	17-item by Utrecht Work Engagement (UWES)	• Co-worker and supervisor support significantly associated with engagement.
Odunayo. T, Ayodeji. B, & Ellis (2017)	9-item by Utrecht Work Engagement (UWES) and Psychological Empowerment Scale (PES)	• Psychological empowerment predicts engagement.
Pham-Thai, McMurray, Muenjohn, & Muchiri (2018)	19-items from Bass & Avolio (2004)	• Transformational leadership and high-performance HR practices predict engagement.

Source: Author's Compilations

2.2   Psychological Empowerment and Engagement

According to Albrecht, Bakker, Gruman, Macey, & Saks (2015), they found that there are fewer shreds of evidence in supporting a solid justification between impact and engagement and there is also an association between employee empowerment on engagement in weak findings. Despite the substantial academic literature in explaining the concept of psychological empowerment, there are loopholes in research perspective on the usage of psychological empowerment especially in the Southeast Asian perspective (Bordin, Bartram, & Casimir, 2006). The concept of psychological empowerment has been studied and implemented throughout the Western countries in engaging the hearts of employees and at the same time increasing employee performances (Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 1999).

In place of this viewpoint, psychological empowerment may be viewed as one of the antecedents of employee engagement, with the more psychologically empowered an employee, the more engaged he or she would become. Another research conducted by Xiao, Liu, & Chen (2017) institute that the significant effect of performance feedback on engagement when being mediated through psychological empowerment and also the direct relationship to engagement at the same time were significant. Despite the fact that the coefficient value fell, this suggests that psychological empowerment plays a mediating function between performance feedback and engagement. The findings suggest that psychological empowerment might act as a mediator in the link between employee feedback and engagement.

Synthetizing to the above theory, this study concludes that empowerment theory explains the entrustment that is being given to employees in managing their day-to-day business operations. Moreover, empowerment theory compliments on Social Exchange Theory (SET) in explaining the relationship between variables that are associated with employee engagement. By assessing employees through four variables which are meaning, competence, self-determination and the impact could assist the overall relationships process in assisting engagement among academics in Malaysian PHEIs. The following section will be discussing the outcomes of employee engagement based on various research in different contexts.

2.2.1 Perceived Organizational Support

Employees who feel safe while working in the organisation will create a circle of openness and at the same time provides support to other organisational members. According to Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades (2002), perceived organisational support can be explained as a basic notion on employees who believed that their organisation appreciate their sacrifice and at the same time cares on their well-being. This crucial foundation of abutment can be described through Social Exchange Theory (SET) as perceived organisational support create a sense of responsibility among employees to work hard and at the same time assisting the organisation to achieve its objectives. A study conducted by Côté, Lauzier, & Stinglhamber (2020) among 289 who were in the age between 20 to 60 years old in Belgian healthcare institutions reveals that their study focused on the mediating role of perceived organisational support in the relationship between engagement and job satisfaction, and they concluded that perceived organisational support had no relationship with employee engagement. The findings show that even when engagement is high, it leads to a high level of job satisfaction, regardless of the perceived level of organisational support that mediates the relationship. It is interesting to note that the effect of presenteeism on job satisfaction and engagement is less when perceived organisational support is high compared to when perceived organisational support is low, implying that perceived organisational support does not reinforce the effect of engagement on job satisfaction.

2.2.2 Job Characteristics

According to Hackman & Oldham (1976), who pioneered the perspective of work redesign mentioned that the overall function of job characteristics are implemented as it will provide employees with enriching their tasks by planning, design, establishing their own work pace and handling the outcomes to respective clients who are the result of their work. Recently, a study conducted by Rai & Maheshwari (2020) among 622 employees who are working in India's public sector banking industry founds out that job characteristics is significantly correlated to work engagement $(\beta = .57, p < .001)$ and organisational engagement $(\beta = .36, p < .001)$. It was concluded that a well-designed job could identify the positive attitude and behaviour of the employee on the job, resulting in a positive psychological condition, such as being highly involved in the company. Employees who perform an enriched job will probably perceive their job as significant

and responsible, which explains to them that they are highly engaged in their work and organisation.

Nonetheless, another recent study conducted by Kidane & Xuefeng (2021) among 317 Ethiopian commercial banks in analysing the relationship between self-supporting motivation and employee engagement concluded that the role and the unforeseen conditions of organisational tenure play a crucial role that may affect the position of employees in increasing their level of engagement and thus in increasing their performance. Their findings demonstrate that the autonomy that has been sub-set and adapted from the Job Characteristics model, however, shows that autonomy has no direct impact on cognitive nor physical commitment. Similarly, Han, Sung, & Suh (2021) conducted a research among 309 employees currently working in South Korean IT firms, analysing the relationships of job characteristics as a moderator between engagement and employee performance were tested. The findings suggest that when employees report low levels of job characteristics as a broadening construct, the construct of engagement in the relationship between meaningfulness and performance can be strengthened.

2.2.3 Skill Utilization

Skill utilisation can be defined as the level of similarity between an individual's skills and experiences based on their job responsibilities. On the job itself (O'Brien, 1983). It can be described as the requirements that are required to do the job in the implementation level of skills and experience one must have in ensuring that the responsibilities of the job are being met. Skill utilisation has proven as one of the crucial factors on of job characteristics towards job satisfaction, positive behaviour and affective wellbeing. Recently, Nguyen & Pham (2020) conducted a survey among 200 employee who are currently working in Vietnam's non-profit organisations shows that skills utilisation, in this case which is embedded under work design shows a significant relationship on employee engagement $(\beta = .38, p < 0.001)$. According to the findings, the opportunity for personal growth is one of the most important factors that ensures employees stay with the organisation while also demonstrating their skills through hands-on activities. At the same time, the non-profit organisation's practical opportunities can be viewed as a steppingstone for employees to prepare themselves for the future.

Similarly, the above statement were supported by Ree & Wiig (2020) who conducted a research among 139 healthcare professionals in Norway proves that skill utilisation which is embedded under job resources can be considered as the strongest predictor on employee engagement $(\beta = .37, p < 0.001)$. It will lead to increased commitment among health care workers by offering employees the opportunity to develop their personal growth and development and thus learn new things and above all to practise their skills.

3 Conclusion and Implication to Theory and Practise

The varying environment of employee engagement and the breakdown of each dimension of psychological empowerment has resulted in the need of reviewing these factors to employee engagement among academics in Malaysian PHEIs. Given the nature of employee engagement strategies that are implemented in PHEIs all across Malaysia
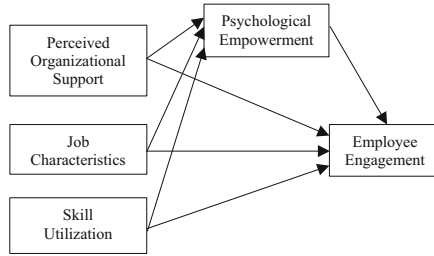
Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for employee engagement among academics in Malaysian PHEIs.

are unharmonized due to various needs, the espousal of psychological empowerment is likely to influence the engagement strategies within the ecosystem.

The result from this study is an extension of Blau (1964) Social Exchange Theory which posits that employees should be treated well so that it can enhance their performance in the organisation. This desire to achieve equilibrium between what is acquired on what is desired by employees can be explained through SET by Blau (1964), where commitment can be recognised as reciprocity to what they received from the organisation. Hence, by expanding this theory could increase the understanding of the relationships between academics on the environment of their respective PHEIs.

The present findings also underscore the importance of the Empowerment Theory. Zimmerman (1995), who introduced the concept of empowerment highlights the importance of individual's perspective on his or her work could be translated by the increment of the employee's intrinsic task motivation that could be described in four types of cognition which are: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Past researchers are mainly concentrated on the overall functions of psychological empowerment and there is scarce research who are concentrating on testing each dimension of the theory and especially its relationships as a mediator on employee engagement. The findings of this study enhanced our understanding of employee engagement especially on the mediating influence of psychological empowerment based on various strategies that have been taken by Malaysian PHEIs. The result presented can be served as a base for future studies to examine other determinants that could influence the perceptions of employee engagement. The current findings add to the understanding of employee engagement and its interdependent variables in terms of each dimension under psychological empowerment. As such, it adds to the rising body of literature on employee engagement as well as the dimensions of psychological empowerment adoption literature. Taken together, these findings suggest the prominent role of psychological empowerment on employee engagement adoption, hence the strategic positions of Malaysian PHEIs in the employee engagement ecosystem (Fig. 1).

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