THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGFULNESS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: MODERATING EFFECT OF AGE AND GENDER

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ABSTRACT

There has been a great deal of interest in employee engagement over the years, and it has become a popular term. However, there is no one universally acceptable definition for employee engagement until now. Employee engagement has been defined in many ways, and its assessment also seems to be similar, as developed by scholars such as Kahn [1] who coins the term psychological meaningfulness. This paper reviews the literature surrounding employee engagement, especially in terms of psychological meaningfulness. Next, this paper observes existing theories of employee engagement. This paper also attempts to find out whether age and gender moderate the relationship between psychological meaningfulness and employee engagement. Review of existing literature confirms that psychological meaningfulness is an important factor in gauging employee engagement.

Keywords: Employee engagement, Psychological meaningfulness, Moderating effect, Job burout, Commitment, Involvement

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly competitive environment, many organisations distinguish that in order to secure and retain a pool of satisfied and loyal employees, they have to deliver the best quality to gain survival and success. Hence, the capable leaders are prioritised in order to survive in a globalised world and at the same time to plot a strategy to provide firm competition in the market.

Strategies are focused on sales and services increment and at the same time retaining a high performance and proficient discharge of its duties at the workplace. Companies with a good employee engagement will find that the achievement is something challenging to duplicate by competitors and at the same time very difficult to create the conditions and behaviours involving labour [2]. It is important to highlight employee engagement in the organisation as it is a solvable source of competitive advantage and organisational problems. At the same time, employee engagement helps in promoting better employee performance and productivity. Previous researches on employee engagement show a positive change in the organisation [3-5].

Engaged employees show high spirit in keeping smooth and effective job [2, 6]. Employee absenteeism is found to be low because the employees have a high level of interest in their work, and such employees exhibit lower physical absenteeism compared to their peers [7]. Engaged employees have also been found to be less interested in working elsewhere and prefer to serve longer in their company, thus minimising the cost of recruitment and retraining [8]. It is not surprising that about 30% of American employees are engaged in their jobs, and the figure has not changed much in more than a decade [9]. The median Gallup employee engagement among clients is 47% thus displays the highest accomplishment among the best Gallup clients. The companies involved have an average of 63% of actively engaged employees, and none of the employees is actively disengaged. Moreover, the ratio is more than five times of the national average [9]. As mentioned by Sorenson and Garman [10], the Gallup estimates that the loss of productivity involves $450 billion to $550 billion as a result of disengaged employees. After spending resources into developing engaged workforce on factory floors in European-based plants, Caterpillar, a large multinational construction equipment supplier and manufacturer, estimates that the company has saved $8.8 million in turnover costs [8].

The impact of highly engaged employees can be observed through production and staff retention. An average loss of 7.6 working days per year has been shown by engaged employees, while 14.1 days of average lost have been shown by disengaged employees. The average significant difference involving disengaged employees has the highest desire to leave the organisation [11]. A large manufacturing firm in the United States had an increment of $2 million in profit from sales as a result of employee engagement. The U.S. economy slumps between $250 billion and $300 billion a year as a result of disengaged employees lacking contribution in productivity [12]. Similarly, actively disengaged employees cost the German economy between €112 billion and €138 billion per year [13]. Singaporean economy lost 6 billion Singaporean dollars from 2001 to 2004 as a result of disengaged employees [14]. In order to develop and promote the culture of engagement within the organisations, the top management is currently seeking the help of researchers among human resource practitioners [8]. Therefore, these practitioners have developed structured courses to educate managers in improving their communication and management within the organisations [15]. Other than that, human resources have taken the efforts with the support of the employee survey to create a flexible training programme and to develop long term strategic plans with the hope that all the employees could participate together to develop the plans [15].

Currently, employers in private companies and government agencies are aware and are giving concern on the significance of employee engagement in their organisations. Employee engagement is an effort to guarantee that the employees engage with their roles. There are three levels of engagement as represented by these questions: (1) Do the employees like where they work now?; (2) Will the employees remain with the organisation?; and (3) Will the employees work at other places? There is a relationship among the elements that influence employee engagement in the organisation [16]. Happy employees who are about to leave the organisation and unhappy employees who are determined to stay with the organisation are both communal, but neither supports high level of organisational performance [17].

Due to globalisation, Malaysia is no exclusion in the face of powerful competition. The global financial crisis in 2007–2008 has put pressure on private companies and government to be more competitive in services and businesses. Therefore, employee engagement has emerged as a hot topic among top managements as it is the key element for an organisation to succeed [11]. Malaysia is located in the Asia Pacific region. Based on the study by Tower Watsons, 39% of employees in the Asia Pacific are highly engaged at work [11]. Employees are not capable to show their seriousness and stability in carrying out their duties. Lack of employee engagement has made the organisations to bear high costs due to lost productivity, high staff turnover, and low work performance [11].

Lack of employee engagement that leads to employee retention remains a major challenge for local companies, according to a Global Workforce Study 2012 by global professional services firm, Towers Watson. In order to gain awareness into how workers view engagement in affecting their conduct and performance of their duties and commitment to their employer, approximately 1,000 workers in Malaysia were chosen for the study. Yap Swee Pheng, Practice Leader, Organisation and Vision Research Review Tower Watson in Malaysia said that the level of employee engagement cannot be maintained especially when workers are not clear with the view on career growth, thus stopping them from finding what they are supposed to do for betterment. The survey found that 51% of workers in Malaysia felt that career advancement opportunities are limited in their organisations, while 56 per cent of employees surveyed considered their managers ineffective in managing their career development [18]. Level of employee engagement in Malaysia is still low. According to the study by Crabtree [19], only 11% employees are engaged, 81% are disengaged, and 8% are actively disengaged. Employees in the private sectors in the Klang Valley in Malaysia are also experiencing problems in employee engagement. Previous researchers found that goal setting, job role autonomy, and benefits are associated to employee engagement [20]. The study conducted in one of Malaysia's electronic manufacturing firms also shows that organisational practices have 43.2% impact on employee engagement [21]. According to Brown [11], even though an organisation has a high rate of employee engagement, there are still other important factors such as effective communication, effective communication to employee recognition, performance management, and employee leadership that should be of equal concern of the organisation.

1.1. Types of Employees

Coffman [22] states that there are three types of employees. The first type is engaged employees who are highly focused on jobs and have personal commitment to what they do, and these employees want to stay working with the company. Engaged employees will work beyond what is expected by the company. In addition to that, according to Vazirani [23], engaged employees are builders. For a given task, they want to do better than what is expected. They are highly competent and consistent in performing tasks, they are glad to use their talent and strengths at work every day. They are also highly passionate in working, and they provide new innovations to the company to move further. According to Sanford [24], only 29 % of employees are actively engaged in their jobs. These are the employees who help develop the organisation as they are very enthusiastic and competitive.

The second type of employees, according to Coffman [22], is the nonenergetic workers, or the nonengaged employees. According to Vazirani [23], this type of employees sets the priorities on goals and tasks and put the consequences that must be solved second. They just want to be told what they can do and complete the job. They focus on accomplishing tasks versus achieving an outcome [7]. Sanford [24] supports that 54% of employees are not engaged. This type of employees puts time and deadlines to ensure the mandated work run smoothly. However, they work unwillingly and are demotivated.

The last type of employees is actively disengaged employees. This type of employees tries to influence the engaged into disengaged by letting everyone knows that they are unhappy. Vazirani [23] describes this type of employees as the "cave dwellers" who " damage everything". They are dissatisfied and unhappy at work. They give bad perception and negatively affect the engaged employees. According to Vazirani [23], actively disengaged employees highly depend on each other in preparing and solving products and services. The problems and tensions raised by the disengaged workers tend to cause severe damage to the stability of the organisation's functioning. 17% of employees are actively disengaged [24]. These employees would rather show no such sense of contentment and try to discourage other colleagues who want to work [24]. According to Gallup Daily tracking, employee disengagement problems have an impact on the economy in Germany. About 15% of workers in Germany are engaged with their jobs, 61% are not engaged, and 24% are actively disengaged. It is estimated that actively disengaged employees cost the economy between €112 billion and €138 billion per year in lost productivity [13].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the academic community, employee engagement is a newly discovered concept and is promoted by the relevant consultant [25]. Kahn [1] and other academics such as Macey & Schneider [2] are in an attempt to resolve the issues of employee engagement. Kahn [1] believes that organisations with high employee engagement display positive outlook to the organisational outcome [26]. Following a communication programme, impressive scores of employee engagement related to increment in profit margins, productivity, and positive workplace have been noted [27]. In a study conducted by Czarnowsky [28], a total of 82% of employees confessed that employee engagement was the important factor that needed to be confronted. Research shows that a

developing organisation will recognise employees who show high performance, demonstrate good cooperation among themselves [28], and have respectable achievement [29]. Organisations that are in search of ways to develop their workforce agree that their organisations need employee engagement [29].

Significant gap related to research involving employee engagement has grown from the bottom up, and the concept of employee engagement has shown a weighty change in the definition in terms of measurement concepts concerning all the researches from the academic community [2]. Due to lack of research on the concept, strategies are carefully planned to develop the workforce involved in the employee engagement [30]. There are about 21 perspectives in the concept of employee engagement among academics and practitioners, and different approaches are used by these academics and practitioners [2, 25]. For example, practitioners need an intelligent approach to increase employee engagement in teamwork [25]. The practitioners should obtain evidence in the form of reliability estimation and metrics.[8, 28, 31, 32]. Based on the approach used by academic psychologists, the focuses on the concept of self-verification or individual [25] are to distinguish the variables that embolden the development of employee engagement and to come out with a new approach that has been identified by academics in scholarly literature [25, 30].

The purpose of this section is to discuss the conceptual disparities on the definition of employee engagement. Based on many publications in the area of human resource management, psychology, and management databases [33], a few approaches that define employee engagement are identified. The concept of engagement was first introduced by Kahn [1] to explain how people are personally engaged and disengaged at work. In his ethnographic study, Kahn [1] interviewed 32 employees, 16 summer camp counsellors, and 16 financial professionals. Kahn [1] defines that personal engagement is when the members in an organisation are being responsible to their own roles in the organisation. Individuals can express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally while playing their respective roles. According to Kahn [1], engagement is "the coinciding employment and expression of a person's 'preferred self' in task performances which are connected to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performances." Kahn [1] suggests that the conditions of meaningfulness, safety, and availability are important to fully understand the purpose of a person's engagement in his or her work. Kahn states that meaningfulness involves a sense of investment of the self in work performances. Safety is defined as a sense of being able to invest oneself in the work role performances without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career. Lastly, availability refers to individuals' sensing that they are ready to personally engage at a particular moment. Individuals who are available feel that they are capable and prepared to invest their physical cognitive and emotional resources into role performances, while individuals who are unavailable either lack these energies or are distracted from investing them in work role performances. These three conditions accurately reflect the basic logics of contracts when they believe that they possess the resources necessary to meet their obligations when the contracts contain clear and desired benefits and finally when the contracts also offer protective guarantees. However, in terms of psychology, Kahn does not take into account the theory of engagement such as employee involvement and commitment in the workplace. However, matters relating to employee engagement and commitment developed by Kahn have

helped clarify personal engagement and disengagement during work. Kahn states that employee behaviour in the workplace deals with certain conditions and commitments. Kahn does not provide a comprehensive review on the exact way to address employee engagement, and at the same time he does not try to expand the study of burnout on the concepts developed [34].

Maslach and Leiter [34] reintroduce the concept of engagement as an energetic state of involvement that is hypothesised to be the contradictory of burnout. According to Maslach, et al. [35], energy, involvement, and efficacy are the elements characterised from engagement. These elements are direct opposite to the three burnout dimensions namely exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. Burnout construct is complex. Some researchers have attempted to organise the research on burnout by formalising it as a model such as Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. Bakker and Demerouti [36] define job demands as physical, social, or organisational aspects that involve the immersion of relevant physical and mental effort. This effort eventually leads to burnout but is mediated by access to job resources. As such, the long-term effect that can be seen is high job demand.

From the models introduced by Maslach, et al. [35] and Schaufeli and Salanova [37], employee engagement could be distinguished from other psychological constructs such as flow commitment [38]. This leads to the argument on the antithesis of burnout in contributing to engagement. Engagement is not the antithesis of burnout. A disengaged employee does not necessarily suffer from burnout. For example, an employee may find himself performing repetitive routines, but it does not prove that he is suffering from exhaustion of burnout.

Engagement has also been defined as an individual's involvement, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for work [3]. Gallup Work Audit (GWA) was used in the study. The study determines employee engagement as working to satisfaction and of high morale. The results show that employee engagement has a positive relation to significant business aftermaths such as customer satisfaction, turnover, safety, productivity, and profitability. Job satisfaction explains how gratified an individual is with his or her job. It is a pleasurable emotional state as a result of the appraisal of one's job [39]. Luthans and Peterson [40] extend the model introduced by Harter, et al. [3] by examining the connection between employee engagement and other dependent variables namely managerial self-efficacy and perception towards effective management practices. The results proposed a positive relation between employee engagement and manager self-efficacy scores when managers rated employee effectiveness ($r = .33$) and when supervisees rated their manager's level of effectiveness ($r = .89$). [40] summarise that companies would rather make a revenue with the people they think are the best. Perceptions of work characteristics based on the definition of engagement leads to conceptual overlaps with job involvement. Hallberg and Schaufeli [41] conducted a study on 186 IT consultants from Sweden, and it was proven that task overlaps with other concepts of involvement and commitment to the organisation. Saks [30] differentiates job engagement from organisation engagement. It is said that organisational engagement is an attitude of contributing to the organisation, while employee engagement is the role played by an employee to carry out the responsibilities entrusted to him or her. Furthermore, May, et al. [6] propose that engagement is a different concept towards involvement in any job inclusive of emotion and physical, but occupational involvement is purely an act of cognition. Moreover, employees are

deeply engaged in their work due to their involvement. Statistical comparison between employee engagement psychometric testing with organisational commitment and employee involvement suggests that engagement is a combination of the two constructs rather two separate concepts. Hallberg and Schaufeli [41] argue that job involvement is a function of the individual and should be seen as a predecessor in a research model, whereas engagement should be seen as a dependent variable in a research model.

In summary, Kahn [1] need satisfying approach has been selected by the researcher as the core for the study of employee engagement. While each approach proposes different perspective, the varying approaches remain clear and unanimous in conclusion that the development of employee engagement within organisations has the potential to significantly impact important organisational outcomes [2, 30, 35, 42, 43].

Over the past two decades, various theories have been developed in relation to employee engagement. For example, Kahn's personal engagement model states that psychological conditions are antecedents of engagement factors associated with psychological conditions of engagement through meaningfulness, safety, and availability. Although scholars do not always explicitly use the original concept related to Kahn's personal engagement model, still a large part of it demonstrates these three psychological conditions. Similar to job characteristics theory [40], Kahn observes that people have different experiences that involve daily assignments, and sometimes it involves psychological conditions that lead to personal engagement in work roles. Normally, organisations will attempt to answer these three questions, and the level of employee engagement depends on the answers given; the questions are as follows: (i) How meaningful is it for me to bring myself into this performance? (ii) How safe is it to do so? (iii) How available am I to do so? These three conditions can perfectly echo the basic logic of contracts. In general, people believe the contract when they consider that they have all the necessities and resources to fulfil their obligations and responsibilities, when it appears that the contracts contain the desired benefits, and when the contracts also offer warranty protection Kahn [1]. Each individual has a degree of readiness by the interest earned, meaningfulness, security, and safety. Psychological combination of the three conditions namely meaningfulness, safety, and availability results in a state of psychological presence.
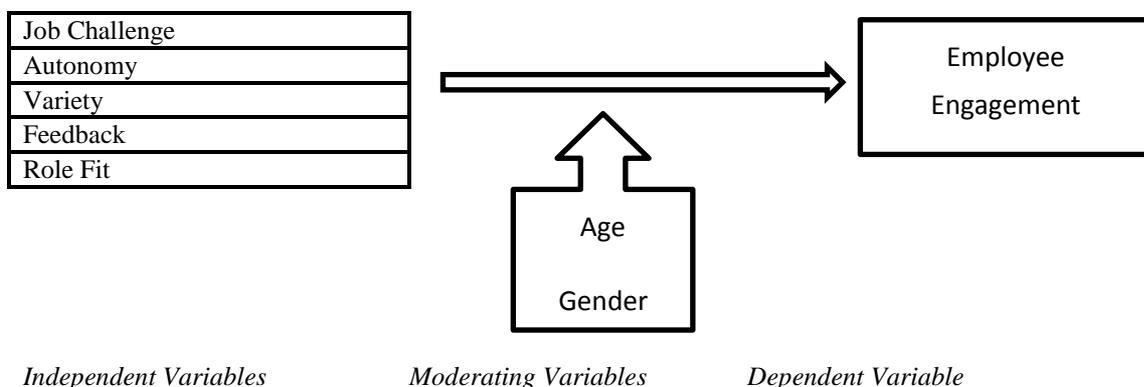
Little empirical researches on the aspects that predict employee engagement have been conducted. However, the researches may come from a number of backgrounds as found by Kahn [1] and Maslach [44] model of job characteristics. Keywords by Kahn [1] are about the same with Hackman and Oldman [40]. In Kahn's psychological meaningfulness, the keywords are job characteristics with no competition, permitting the use of different skills, morals, and initiatives to contribute to the organisation. Hackman and Oldman [40] job characteristics model is composed of several core identities including task significance, autonomy, feedback, and a variety of skills. High employment with the core job characteristics can encourage an individual's participation more effectively on his or her work [1]. The workload and control conditions from the model introduced by Maslach, et al. [35] also suggest the importance of job characteristics for engagement. In fact, job characteristics especially feedback and autonomy have been consistently linked to burnout [35]. According to Kahn [1], the variables in the psychological meaningfulness role are inclusive of job

challenge, autonomy, variety, feedback, role fit, opportunity for development, and rewards and recognition. Next, according to May, et al. [6], job enrichment is positively related to meaningfulness, and meaningfulness mediates the relationship between job enrichment and engagement. Overall factor can be concluded to have a relationship with engagement because these factors offer chances and enticements to employees in providing the best work to the organisation.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The following framework shows the main association of psychological meaningfulness antecedents. The framework is drawn from Kahn [1] with psychological meaningfulness antecedents as the independent variables, age and gender as the moderating variables, and employee engagement as the dependent variable. The following figure presents the theoretical framework of the proposed study:

Figure 1. Conceptual model of moderating effect of age and gender in the relationship between psychological meaningfulness antecedents and employee engagement

| Job Challenge |
| Autonomy |
| Variety |
| Feedback |
| Role Fit |

Employee Engagement

Age
Gender

Independent Variables   *Moderating Variables*   *Dependent Variable*

As supported by relevant literature discussed earlier, the above framework can be hypothesised as follows:

H1: There is a positive relationship between job challenge and employee engagement.

H2: There is a positive relationship between autonomy and employee engagement.

H3: There is a positive relationship between variety and employee engagement.

H4: There is a positive relationship between feedback and employee engagement.

H5: There is a positive relationship between role fit and employee engagement.

H6: The effect of job challenge on employee engagement can be moderated by age and gender.

H7: The effect of autonomy on employee engagement can be moderated by age and gender.

H8: The effect of variety on employee engagement can be moderated by age and gender.

H9: The effect of feedback on employee engagement can be moderated by age and gender.

H10: The effect of role fit on employee engagement can be moderated by age and gender.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Several restrictions are considered to ensure that the study is precise and effective. First, this study primarily concerns about participants among the assistant registrars of the 20 universities in Malaysia. UiTM has many branches in every state, so the researcher will only include participants from UiTM Shah Alam and other main campus of other universities. Second, the target group will be at least 50 participants from each university, contributing to a sample size of 1,000 people. As cited in Sekaran (2003), according to Roscoe (1975), a sample size of larger than 30 and less than 500 are appropriate for most researches. Besides, the interview will be conducted on the selected person in each university. Ideally, the researcher is keen in targeting the person with working experience at the same university for more than 5 years. Stratified and purposive sampling methods will be conducted to the participants involved.

4. EXPECTED OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

This paper tries to put forth the idea that age and gender moderate the relationship between psychological meaningfulness antecedents and employee engagement. This area is certainly worth the research as many Malaysian organisations are beginning to identify employee engagement as a competitive benefit to the degree that it enhances their overall employee performance. Employee engagement helps the organisation to reduce turnover, enhance team work, and improve the employee productivity, which in turn will increase the overall organisational performance. This study is deemed important as it will aid the developmental strategies to enhance and improve employee engagement in organisations. This study will give an idea to the top management of all the public universities in Malaysia on the awareness of employee engagement. This study can also be useful for them to understand the approaches to be taken in order to enhance employee engagement. The findings of this study will also approve that employee engagement is very important to any organisations that seek to improve their performance. Elements that may affect employee engagement will also be conveyed. As this paper is only theoretical, future studies may incorporate empirical data that will be collected from a few departments in universities in Malaysia.

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