



# A Conceptual Study of Psychological Capital Mediates the Relationship Between Positive Emotions and Work Engagement: Pathways to Achieving Sdgs in Academic Organisations

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## Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are fundamental to fostering sustainable advancement in regions where sustainable strategies are implemented. The positive perspective on personal strengths and resources in academic organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a high interest in positive emotions and psychological capital in the education setting. Positive emotions and psychological capital are the variables viewed as a sense of well-being and positive attitude in academic organizations. Thus, this study supports Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3 (good health and well-being), while work engagement as the primary variable promotes SDG 4 (quality education). An engaged educator can ensure adaptivity and enhance performance to provide quality education. Nevertheless, only limited studies examined the interaction between these variables in the academic context. Previous studies focused only on students and job performance outcomes among corporate employees. However, none focused on academics' well-being for establishing sustainability-related practices. This study, guided by the broaden-and-build theory, aims to examine the association between job-related positive emotions and work engagement and the mediating role of psychological capital. This study adopts a quantitative research technique, while a simple random method will be employed for data collection. The partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) methodology will be utilized for data analysis. The sample selection will be Malaysian HEIs academicians from different disciplines in line with the SDGs. Academicians' job-related positive emotions are anticipated to relate to better work engagement through positive relationships with psychological capital levels (i.e., efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience). This study will provide first-hand information on the relationship between job-related positive emotions, psychological capital, and work engagement among Malaysian HEIs academicians.

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**Key Words:** SDGs, positive emotions, psychological capital, work engagement, higher education

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## Introduction

Academic organizations want engagement, commitment, and energy from their employees. These work outcomes emerge from positive emotions (Hazelton, 2014). Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic has upended almost every aspect of higher education at once. More fundamentally, many HEIs, and their academic staff, have struggled to respond to educational provision and have to cope with the multiple complications and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Leal Filho et al., 2021). For this reason, the positive

perspective on personal strengths and resources in academic organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a high interest in positive emotions and psychological capital in the education setting for greater personal and professional success. Emotions and psychological capital are parts of being human (Trampe, Quoidbach & Taquet, 2015). There is compelling evidence that positive emotions are not just the result of well-being but can also drive success and well-being (Rusu & Colomeischi, 2020).

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Therefore, it is helpful to understand more about emotions and their direct or indirect outcomes, such as psychological capital and work engagement, in this context. This study is particularly significant as the study has a strong link and is interconnected with SDGs. In addition, in alignment with 2030 Agenda, the issue of sustainability in higher education has gained the attention of scholars (Jang, 2017; Figueiró & Raufflet, 2015; Mader, Scott & Dzulkifli, 2013; Scott, Tilbury, Sharp & Deane, 2012), this is because HEIs are fundamental to fostering sustainable advancement in regions where sustainable strategies are implemented.

The SDGs, also known as the Global Goals, were a call to action to bring worldwide transformation through the 2030 agenda by addressing numerous challenges humans face to warrant environmental protection, well-being, and economic prosperity. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SD) has 17 targets and 169 indicators that are spelt out, encompassing economic, social, and environmental aspects. (Kumar, Kumar & Vivekadhish, 2016). Education plays a central theme throughout the 2030 Agenda, including a stand-alone education goal and education-related targets within seven others of the 17 SDGs (Mokshein, 2019).

There are two SDG goals we are concerned with within this study. Positive emotions and psychological capital are the variables viewed as a sense of well-being and positive attitude in academic organizations. Thus, this study supports SDG 3 (good health and well-being), while work engagement as the primary variable promotes SDG 4 (quality education). An engaged educator can ensure adaptivity, sustainable competitive advantage, and enhance performance to provide quality education. Good quality education significantly impacts society and economics. In more emphasis, the third goal of the SD Agenda, known as SDG 3 aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages. In contrast, the fourth goal, known as SDG 4 aims, to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.

Nevertheless, only limited studies examined the interaction between these variables in the academic context. Previous studies focused only on students (Carmona-Halty, Schaufeli & Salanova, 2019; You, 2016) and job performance outcomes among

corporate employees (Kock & Moqbel, 2021; Rai, 2017). However, none focused on academics' well-being for establishing sustainability-related practices. This study, guided by the broaden-and-build theory, aims to examine the association between job-related positive emotions and work engagement and the mediating role of psychological capital.

### Research objectives

This study aims to fill the knowledge gap by examining the relationship between job-related positive emotions, psychological capital, and work engagement. The study findings will assist policymakers and universities in enhancing engagement through positive emotions and psychological capital development among academicians. This study will address the following research questions (RQ) to address the literature gap:

RQ1: What is the relationship between job-related positive emotions and work engagement?

RQ2: What is the relationship between job-related positive emotions and psychological capital?

RQ3: What is the relationship between psychological capital and work engagement? [1278](#)

RQ4: To what extent psychological capital mediates the relationship between job-related positive emotions and work engagement?

Based on the research questions, the following research objectives (RO) are developed:

RO1: To examine the relationship between job-related positive emotions and work engagement.

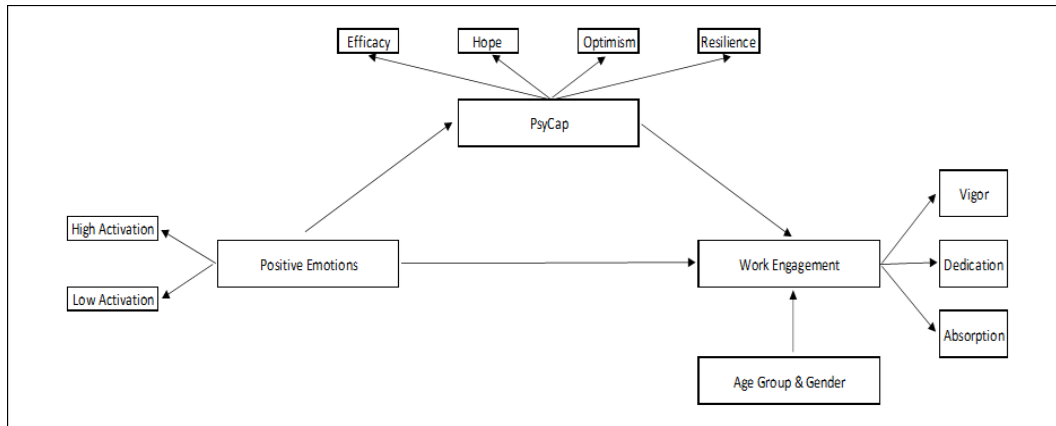
RO2: To examine the relationship between job-related positive emotions and psychological capital.

RO3: To examine the relationship between psychological capital and work engagement.

RO4: To investigate the mediation effect of psychological capital between job-related positive emotions and work engagement.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model of the study. The figure shows that psychological capital mediates the relationship between positive emotions and work engagement. Figure 1 further depicts the relationship between positive emotions and work engagement among academicians in Malaysia.





**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

**Literature Review**

The broaden-and-build theory explains the ways positive emotions assist in building and enhancing (personal) resources (Fredrikson, 1998), which sequentially might steer to a lasting positive well-being state and future positive outcomes (Fredrikson, 2013; Mauss et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). Positive emotions are considered multisystem reactions and change how people communicate or interpret the present situation (Fredrikson, 2013). Kong, Tsai, Tsai, Huang, la Cruz and Malapitan (2018) opined that positive emotions potentially enhance individual thought processes. Under the influence of positive emotion, more excellent perception occurs, and more relaxed behaviour is displayed towards the problem. People greatly enhance their resources to deal with unforeseen circumstances under the positive influence.

Kim, Perrewé, Kim and Kim (2017) consider psychological capital as the personal resource based on the B&B theory. Psychological capital denotes an individual’s positive psychological state and is presented in the form of positive psychological strength. Psychological capital is characterised by the confidence (efficacy) to give the best effort to overcome challenges. The second aspect is related to positive attribution or optimism. Optimism thought process in an individual provides the solution to a prevailing situation. Another two aspects are goal-oriented (hope) and resilience. Resilience implies sustaining a setback and moving forward to achieve a goal. According to Xu, Liu and Chung (2017), optimism, hope, efficacy, and resilience share standard features and are considered part of a synergistic resource set. Da, He and Zhang (2020) discovered that whenever employee perceives strong support from the organizations, they develop

a robust emotional and cognitive evaluation of their organizations or their assigned job role in the organisation.

The proposed study is based on certain assumptions on the hypothesis stemming from broaden-and-build theory. The hypothesis stated that positive emotion plays a role in building personal resources and produce well-being (Hasan, Guampe & Maruf, 2019). For instance, tracking work and maintaining a diary on the work predicted hope, which sequentially promotes better work engagement to accomplish the hope. Several studies revealed that work-related emotions potentially influence the learning and achievement of the people engaged with the particular work. Work engagement states that the workers’ engagement level considers the aspects such as dedication towards the assigned task and energy level while engaged in the task.

Burhanuddin, Ahmad, Said and Asimiran (2019) found that positive emotions effectively predict hope associated with work engagement. Madrid, Daiz, Leka, Leiva and Borros (2018) reported that beliefs of engagement and efficacy greatly influence each other with the assistance of positive emotions. The research on psychological capital has facilitated the organization in understanding various determinants involved in enhancing the employees’ productivity. By accumulating psychological resources, an employee enhances the performance and engagement level (Aslam, Nor, Omar & Bustaman, 2020; Alessandri, Consiglio, Luthans & Borgogni, 2018; Hazelton, 2014).

Conversely, previous research on students also revealed that study-related positive emotions (Carmona-Halty, Salanova, Llorens & Schaufeli, 2021; Carmona-Halty et. al., 2019; Datu, King & Valdez, 2018) and academic psychological capital (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya 2014) influence students’



academic engagement and learning outcome. The outcomes from corporate employees and student-related studies supported the broaden-and-build theory that cognitive, motivational variables highly influence their positive well-being and future outcomes. Past studies have reaffirmed that positive emotions greatly influence individuals' personal resources.

Thus, the empirical results exhibited that positive emotional experience is crucial for comprehending the development of personal resources and engagement. The hypotheses are developed parallel to past studies and steered by broaden-and-build theory, as shown below. The study will notably consider age group and gender as the control variables to allow the researchers to address the endogeneity issue (Hult, Proksch, Sarstedt, Pinkwart & Ringle, 2018). Hence, this study is based on these developed sets of hypotheses, which are summarized and stated below:

Hypothesis 1: Job-related positive emotion positively influences work engagement.

Hypothesis 2: Job-related positive emotion positively influences psychological capital.

Hypothesis 3: Psychological capital positively influences work engagement.

Hypothesis 4: Job-related positive emotion positively influences work engagement through psychological capital.

## Methodology

The research design, analytic procedures, measures, study population, and sampling are discussed in this section.

## Research design and analytic procedure

This study will adopt a quantitative design supported by the post-positivism worldview, while a survey will be used as a measurement instrument (Creswell, 2012). In addition, this study will apply PLS-SEM due to the explanatory-predictive study nature (Henseler, 2018). The study is explanatory-predictive (Henseler, 2018) in order to tackle endogeneity problems in explanatory studies (Hult et al., 2018; Hair, Risher, Sarstedt & Ringle, 2019). The endogenous variables of R<sup>2</sup> values, the statistical inference of path coefficients, effect sizes, prediction errors of the model, and the predictive relevance of each effect will be specifically emphasized, as highlighted by Henseler (2018). Furthermore, latent variable scores are required to assess non-linear relationships in the proposed

model via the two-step approach for suggested robustness check in the PLS-SEM context (Ghasemy, Teeroovengadum, Becker & Ringle, 2020; Sarstedt, Ringle, Cheah, Ting, Moisescu & Radomir, 2020). This study will also include two acknowledged and broadly presented control variables in social science studies to the framework, notably gender and age group (Bernierth & Aguinis, 2016).

## Measures

Positive emotions will be measured utilizing the Job-related Affective Well-being Scale (Van Katwyk, Fox, Spector & Kelloway, 2000). The scale comprises six items, with three items on low-activation and high-activation adapted to the academic context. Academic staff will answer the items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always) to reflect how the respondents feel about their job. Subsequently, psychological capital will be operationalized by four dimensions from the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (Avey, Avolio & Luthans, 2011). This questionnaire section has 12 items, and the respondents will be provided with a six-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). The four dimensions are efficacy (three items), optimism (two items), hope (four items), and resilience (three items).

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova, 2006) will be utilized to assess work engagement. The scale comprises nine items to measure three different engagement dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption. A six-point Likert scale will be used to obtain responses for the work engagement with scores from 0 (never) to 6 (always). Lastly, this study will employ IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24 for data screening and SmartPLS 3.3.3 to perform the primary data analysis (Ringle, Wende & Becker, 2015).

## Population and Sampling

Academicians in the Malaysian higher education system will comprise the target population of the research. As emphasized in the abstract, the academicians were selected due to their significant role in attaining several SDGs. A database of the faculty email addresses will be created according to the email addresses available on the institutions' websites, and an online survey will be administered on the management platform. A simple random sampling will be employed to collect data from the respondents. As the highest quantity of arrows



directing to a construct in the conceptual framework is three, the power analysis results (Cohen, 1988) display the minimum sample size required to correctly assess the model with an 80% statistical power and 5% significance level to observe R2 values of at least 10% should be 103. Thus, no problems will emerge in collecting an adequate sample size.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines the relationship between positive emotions and work engagement and the mediating effect of the psychological capital between the relationship of positive emotions and work engagement in Malaysia HEIs. Academicians' job-related positive emotions are anticipated to relate to better work engagement through positive relationships with psychological capital levels (i.e., efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience).

## Implication

Malaysia is a significant player in the Asia Pacific education sector with a rapidly growing intellectual output. The study possibly benefits by enhancing academicians' positive emotions. This study expects to recommend that universities focus on academicians' feelings instead of exclusively on improving academic skills (i.e., work performance) and knowledge. The focus is on enhancing positive emotions via work psychological capital and translates into improved work engagement. Additionally, the findings will propose several ways to increase the occurrence of positive emotions by fostering academicians' competence and providing positive feedback on their efforts. Besides, university management should display commitment (i.e., caring and display concern on the academicians), offer structure (i.e., establishing explicit rules and following through), and support autonomy (i.e., providing academicians with the autonomy to choose and determining associations between academic studies and students' interests). These organizational supports can enhance academicians' well-being and subsequently contribute to achieving the third goal in SDG.

In addition, policymakers and universities alone cannot achieve SDG Goal 4, namely quality education, without the academicians' contribution and involvement. The direct impact of having a happy and engaged academician will translate into providing quality education to society. Higher education plays an essential role for students and

the society in which the students live. Higher education represents individual growth, leading to a better life with a higher probability of obtaining a well-paid job. Consequentially, society profits as model individuals who can maintain the peace in the society are shaped.

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