

## THE IMPACT OF BIG FIVE PERSONALITY TRAITS ON WORK ENGAGEMENT AMONG MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES ACADEMICS

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the public universities' academics work engagement levels based on the individual personality traits that influences them. It is believed that individual personality has a credentials to a person's attitude or features, which most of the time, being influenced by internal and external factors. Thus, in this study context, researchers' intended to test academics' personality while their engaging with their tasks. This study executed in Malaysia context, survey tested on 147 participants or said 147 academics. The participation indicates 64% of responses. Later, the responses of questionnaires were coded thru SPSS version 26. There are six analyses were executed in this study, namely descriptive analysis, normality analysis, reliability tests, Pearson correlation analysis, simple regression analysis and also multiple regression analysis. Results shows that Big Five personality model are interrelated and correlated with work engagement which aligned with previous studies, except for agreeableness personality that been contradicted with past research in this study context. There is high possibility due to various situational issues, such as in aspect of sampling method or misinterpretation by respondents. Moreover, this study tends to be a contribution to literature and stepping stone for more outcomes. Future studies were proposed.

**Keywords:** *Big Five, Model, Malaysian University Academics, Personality, Work Engagement*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Lately, studies related to work engagement are increases due to COVID-19 endemic. This trend seems to be in line with the phenomena of "back to normal", and the transition moment was practicing back to actual workplace than work-from-home. Thus, most people are comfortable in practicing contemporary norm which is working from own place (home). However, after the endemic phase, the possibility of engaging with works become questionable for many. One of the most prominent factors of leading people engage in workplace is their personality or attitude. Personality have reference to a person's attitude or characteristics, which most of the time, being influenced by internal and external factors. Thus, it is crucial to be aware of our own personality that could help to enhance career development besides conscious on how to be engaged in work setting relationship.

The Big Five traits were well established in identifying different human personality. It is a set of five broad dimension – Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. The emphasisment on personality structure in many previous studies was executing Big Five traits to explain the features of people in workplace, (Soto, 2018). Referring to

study by Fukuzaki & Iwata (2022) explains that personality has direct relationship between personality and work engagement.

The theory part of engagement in work has been broadly explained in diverse field since the establishment of the work engagement concept by authority Khan (1990). He defined work engagement as the “*harnessing of organization member’s selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances*”. Furthermore, through the concept of work engagement, there are three facets that made an employee’s set up their self to be engaged by cognitively, emotionally and physically in the course of performing tasks. (Ibrahim, 2022).

According to a study conducted by Jian et al., (2020) shows employee’s engagement undertaking in Malaysia perceived as a major concern, where about 81% of employees showing less involvement and 8% were not involve in work. Moreover, Aon (2018) states Asia Pacific’s employees engagement level was drop from 61% in year 2016 to 59% in year 2018. Besides, Malaysians were found to be the most least engaged professionals, about 77% of employees were disengaged (Ibrahim, 2021; Dewan 2016). According to a recent study by Qualtrics, Malaysia has a higher rate of employee engagement compared with its global counterparts. The average Malaysian employee engagement score is 54%, higher than the global average of 53%. According to a Gallup study on employee engagement in over 125 organizations, companies that invest in employee engagement can expect earnings to grow 2.6 times faster than companies with low employee engagement. These low-engagement companies experienced a 32% decline in operating income and an 11% decline in earnings per share growth (Juan and Yao, 2017). This show criticality of work engagement in many works field in Malaysia.

Based on the aforementioned findings, employee engagement in Malaysia has significant room for improvement. Improved employee engagement in an organization will allow employees to understand their responsibilities within that organization and will encourage them to work with their colleagues to achieve the company's goals (Mansor et al., 2018). Thus, effective communication, the provision of training and development, as well as the attitude of company leaders, play significant roles in boosting employee engagement (Park, 2019). Moreover, Adhitama and Riyanto (2020) coined employee engagement is a critical factor that drives employee performance, achievement, and consistent improvement throughout an entire year. Thus, present study intents to discover which personality traits that might highly influence one’s to engage and disengage with their work and duties. Answering this question is crucial because while numerous studies have been conducted on employee engagement in recent years (Uddin et al., 2019), studies on employee engagement after the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia are scarce. There are numerous studies been discussed in aspect of work engagement, yet the individuality of this study was direct addressing the issues of work engagement of universities academics through their individual personality.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Numerous definitions been provided for the concept of engagement. Kahn (1990) was the founder of work engagement term that been used in research. Kahn perceive engagement to be psychologically present when occupying and performing an organizational role and vice versa. There are few different terms to state engagement in an organization as it depends on the context of the organization itself besides from the perspective of researcher on which aspect does the researcher wanted to execute, such as work engagement, job engagement or employee engagement.

The concept began from Kahn (1990) on work engagement leads many ideas to researchers to went deeply on mentioned construct and identify and perceive from different perspectives of

meaning, however at end of the day when researcher try to sum up, found that the meaning leads to positive definition on employee's feeling and heart lighten when the employee wants to be engaged with their work.

Work engagement declared "as positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption", (Schaufeli et al., 2002). They state that it's not a momentary but more persistent and persuasive affective-cognitive state and not focus on any particular object, event, individual or behavior. In addition, study conducted by Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova (2006) on work engagement measurement with a cross-national study come out with the same perspective on work engagement. As stated earlier, it able to clarify that most studies on work engagement were indicates same perception that vigor, dedication and absorption act as the key indicator that reflect the underlying dimensions of engagement. In present study, researcher focus on work engagement and also intended to measure this construct by vigor, dedication and absorption dimensions as many previous studied undertaken.

Individual work performance is determined through the engagement of an employee in doing their work. Hence, a reliable and valid instrument must be used to accurately measure the level of work engagement. In current study, measurement was adapted from Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) from Schaufeli et al., 2002 and as referred to which been extensively used (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003; Schaufeli et al., 2006; Alzyoud, et al., 2014; Hoigaard, Giske & Sundsli, 2011). Latest version of UWES-17 items (vigor (6), dedication (5) and absorption (6), was applied in this study. The validity of UWES was referred to the study of Sulaiman and Zahoni (2016) on validation of UWES in the Malaysian study context, to check the validity using exploratory factor analysis managed to extract three factors and the reliability of the scale was satisfactory beside the study provides initial evidence that the instrument that can be used to measure work engagement in Malaysia.

## **2.1 Personality Traits**

Personality has its own role in influencing work engagement, (Langelaan, Bakker, Doornen & Schaufeli, 2006) and it been emphasized that engaged employees frequently practice positive emotion. Many researchers were traditionally linked work engagement to various indicators of occupational well-being like Bakker et al., (2008) linked work engagement to indicators such as job satisfaction, involvement and reduced burnout and as well as objective performance (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). However, very few studies in academic and empirical research (Robinson et al., 2004), that focus solely on personality traits that being crucial dimension to be measured and understand. In order to make employee engage it's a need to tackle personality diversity. Even though, individual personality is micro level, but it majorly influences one to be engage with the work and organization.

Researcher believe that academicians is the backbone of a university due to their specialized role as lecturer, researcher, guider, instructors, and also as an administrator that leads them to have face-to-face interaction with students, colleagues and even outsider regarding with their job duties including industrial people. It is very important to address the issues arise due to the engagement in work as they are in process of developing knowledgeable community. The evidence can be seen in Choi (2013) study which argued the work engagement's antecedents, moderators and consequences and according to Inceoglu & Warr (2012) state that no study has yet examined the relationship between engagement and all five dimensions of personality. Through the observation regarding this personality traits and work engagement do have studies that discussing the relationship on the constructs but, possibly it's does not been extensively discussed.

## **2.2 Extraversion**

Extraversion is indicated by emotions and tendency to seek company of others. It represents the tendency to be sociable, assertive, sociability, active, cheerful, optimistic, and thoughtfulness, (Cherry, 2023). Such individuals, prefer groups, enjoy excitement and experience positive effect such as energy, zeal, and excitement (John & Srivastava, 1999). A study done by Zaidi et al, (2013) states the constructive relationship between Big-Five personality traits on work engagement among public sector university teachers in Lahore, Pakistan. The testing result found a correlation between extraversion and work engagement with 0.235 ( $P < 0.001$ ).

Moreover, scholars that work on this construct found, there are positive correlation between extraversion and work engagement (Langelaan et al., 2006; Mostert & Rothmann, 2006; Wildermuth, 2008; Inceoglu & Warr, 2012). In addition, Akhtar et al (2014) state that their results demonstrate that personality factors are valid predictor of work engagement but not all dimensions were significant predictor as they competed for variance in engagement. Their results show extraversion and work engagement were highly correlated at .01 levels, which they acknowledge that it's the salience of extraversion as predictor of work engagement.

## **2.3 Agreeableness**

Agreeableness is the tendency to be trusting, compliant, caring, considerate, generous, and other prosocial behaviour, (Cherry, 2023). Such individuals have an optimistic view of human nature. They are sympathetic to others and have a desire to help others; in return they expect others to be helpful, coined by zaidi et al (2013). Most studies that focus on agreeableness and work engagement show that there is pragmatic relationship between the constructs. As result from Zaidi et al (2013) study, they found work engagement is positively related to agreeableness which P value is less than 0.01. Additionally, Mostert & Rothmann (2006) report the correlation of 0.26 between agreeableness and work engagement.

On the other hand, Akhtar et al., (2014) did not find any correlation between agreeableness and work engagement which they found that employees who reported seeing themselves as generally more sympathetic and warmer instead of critical on engagement. It quite curious where clearly seen that engaged individuals tend to be helpful, trusting, considerate, and likes to cooperate with others and they are kind to almost everyone and have a forgiving nature (John, Donahue & Kentle, 1991; John, Naumann & Soto, 2008). By this, researcher able to say that sometime being supportive to other will leads to work disengagement. This is mentioned because there is possibility when a person become helpful may cause him or her to have no time for own work, and indirectly leads to disengage with their own work.

## **2.4 Conscientiousness**

Conscientiousness individuals are purposeful and determined. They have the tendency to act dutifully, show self-discipline, and aim for achievement against a measure or outside expectation, claimed by Zaidi et al, (2013). Conscientiousness describes socially prescribed impulse control that facilitates task-and goal-directed behaviour, such as thinking before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules, planning, organizing, and prioritizing tasks (John & Srivastava, 1999). However, according to Cherry (2023) coined that people who score lower in conscientiousness is less structured and less organized. On the other hand, conscientiousness seems has positive correlation with engagement which been declared through the study of Akhtar et al (2014) that the constructs have positive relationship to each other and the study is in line with previous findings that link conscientiousness with work engagement, it explains similar variance in engagement.

## 2.5 Neuroticism

Neuroticism measures the continuum between emotional adjustment or stability and emotional adjustment or neuroticism (Costa and McCrae, 1992). People who have the tendency to experience fear, nervousness, sadness, tension, anger, and guilt are at high end of neuroticism. Individuals scoring at the low end of neuroticism are emotionally stable and even-tempered (Costa and McCrae, 1992; John and Srivastava, 1999). The significance between neuroticism and work engagement seems negative, as researcher came across many studies on this dimension, almost every study emphasized that there is negative correlation between neuroticism and work engagement. The evidence has been indicated in Akhtar et al., (2014) that neuroticism and work engagement were negatively correlated.

Moreover, it been highly supported from previous studies that neuroticism is negatively correlated with work engagement (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Langelaan et al., 2006; Mostert and Rothmann, 2006; Wildermuth, 2008). In Zaidi et al (2013) study, their results indicate the same pattern that the correlation is negative (-0.07; P value is less than 0.10) and been no significance at all in the presence of other variable, which enhance the basement that been studied by previous scholars. It highly demonstrates that the neuroticism is a main element in human behaviour that reflect one's identity or reaction towards something or even someone especially when it in high level. High level of neuroticism leads to work disengagement.

## 2.6 Openness to Experience

Openness to experience is the tendency of the individual to be imaginative, sensitive, original in thinking, attentive to inner feelings, appreciative of art, intellectually curious, and sensitive to beauty (Costa and McCrae, 1992; John and Srivastava, 1999). Such individuals are willing to entertain new ideas and unconventional values. According to BFI, openness to experience individuals is original, ingenious, inventive, and sophisticated in art, music, or literature. Moreover, based on John et al., (1991) coined that openness to experience individual more curious on many different things which have active imagination and love to play with ideas. By this, researcher able to say that engaged academicians are innovative, creative, acquire high imagination and deep knowledge on many aspects. Furthermore, Macey and Schneider (2008) argued that engaged workers not only work more but more importantly they work differently.

There are many studies shows positive correlation between openness to experience and work engagement. According to Zaidi et al., (2013) study, they found positive correlation between openness to experience and work engagement with 0.44 p values is less than 0.01. Individual difference on characteristics been defined as personality which the action of a person undertakes when they face or doing anything. In order to measure the personality, it's a must to have a reliable and valid instrument be used to accurately measure the personality traits. Big Five Inventory (BFI) been adapted from John and Srivastava (1999) for this study as the origin was developed by John et al (1991). It been widely used in psychology. Moreover, study of Fossati, Borroni, Marchione and Maffei (2011) explained that the findings of their study suggest that BFI is a succinct measure of the Big Five personality traits and it provides satisfactory reliability and validity data.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study tested quantitatively and carried comprehensively. In the line with Sekaran & Bougie (2016) coined that research framework can be classified as the main basis on what the whole research paper is founded. Dependent variable applied for this study is work engagement while independent variables are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and

openness to experience. Hypotheses for this framework perceived that all independent variables have positive relationship with work engagement, except for neuroticism that perceives has negative relationship towards work engagement. UWES-17 items used to test work engagement in this study context, which was sourced by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003). On the other hand, for independent variables Big-Five Inventory-44 items were used to test Big Five personality traits sourced from John and Srivastava (1999).

Researchers use convenience sampling for this study by selecting public universities academician to be a part of respondent, 230 questionnaires were distributed and received 147 responses which indicate 64% response rate. Instrument used to collect data from samples is survey questionnaire. It is believed an appropriate instrument is vital to accomplish the purpose of research and also for substantiation of hypotheses proposition. Objective and scope of this research were explained in briefly to the samples with assurance on confidentiality and anonymity. Five-point Likert Scale used for independent variables with ranging of 1-5 and labelled as 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. In fact, there are reverse scoring items of 16 out of 44 items of independent variables. Moreover, for work engagement there are 17 items tested and also used five-point Likert scale with scale labelled as 1= Never, 2= Rarely, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Always. Answers to the questionnaire were coded using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software version 26.0.

#### **4.0 FINDINGS**

There are five statistical techniques were used in this research, namely descriptive analysis, normality analysis, reliability tests, Pearson correlation analysis, simple regression analysis and also multiple regression analysis. Skewness and kurtosis ratios were used to assess significance values for normality. According to Pallant (2007), the ratios indicate symmetry and curve distribution of variables respectively. In regards of Skewness and Kurtosis, the data shows a little skewed and kurtotic, for both work engagement and personality traits, but it does not differ significantly from normality and it enables to assume that data were approximately normally distributed.

Furthermore, pilot test was executed to assess internal consistency in each of the construct. Cooper and Schindler (2013) suggested an appropriate range of sample size for pre-test in the range of 25 to 100, thus this research has approached a total of 40 samples. Further, Cronbach's Alpha values for the variables of pilot study conducted and the results explain dimensions involved is highly reliable. Thus, it's been proceeded to actual test, and its show the instruments used in this study are reliable, where the range of reliability is between .60 to .80.

Mean and standard deviation in descriptive statistics were used to identify the distribution of variables in term of 'central' scores and spread of the values approximately at central tendency. Prior to analysis, the negative items were coded in reverse to ensure all the items are in similar direction, positive. On a scale of 5, mean below 3.0 is low, 3.0 is average, and above 3.0 is high. The summary of the descriptive statistics is shown in Table 1. From the table, it clearly showed the means for all variables is between 2.0 to 3.0, for work engagement were above 3.0, while the means for two variables (extraversion and openness to experience) is above 3.0. However, for agreeableness, conscientiousness and neuroticism is showing below 3.0. Standard deviation for each variable below 1, indicating a concord among the respondents.

**Table 1.** Overall Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variable

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Work Engagement	3.89	.475
Extraversion	3.72	.569
Agreeableness	2.32	.719
Conscientiousness	2.63	.706
Neuroticism	2.71	.700
Openness	3.63	.469

Next, Pearson correlation analysis was undertaken to determine the potential relationship between the named variables. Generally, for behavioral sciences, Davies (1971) who suggest the description of relationship among the variables, explain that 0.01 to 0.09 has very low relationship, 0.10 to 0.29 (low relationship), 0.30 to 0.49 (moderate relationship), 0.50 to 0.68 (strong relationship), 0.7 and above (very strong relationship). Meanwhile, if the value scored zero (0), it referred as no relationship. Based on the findings, correlation results of extraversion and openness to experience shows moderate correlation of .352 and .489 for work engagement. This explains extrovert and open-minded academics tend to engage with their tasks. This likely due to their exposures and interest in education field leads them to be engaged. The correlation results of conscientiousness do not indicate relationship with work engagement. Besides, there are two variables shows negative correlation to work engagement, namely agreeableness and neuroticism.

Simple and multiple regression analysis is an extension of correlation analysis to look into “how” much Big Five personality traits impact work engagement level. This analysis was performed to examine the relationship between a set of independent variables towards dependent variable. By using simple linear regression analysis, the Big Five personality traits in package encountered, found influences on work engagement. The simple linear regression analysis results show that personality traits have relationships with work engagement. Moreover, multiple regression analysis results showed that each dimension of personality traits has correlation with work engagement, with 35.6% of variance. It explained that personality play role for 35.6% in engagement issue, and the rest is due to other factors that leads academicians to engage with their work. Openness to experience seems to be the most significant relating to work engagement, with Beta value of .564, its mean that openness to experience is best predictor of work engagement in aspect of personality.

Based on the discussion above, the objective of this study been accomplished through the hypothesis testing. Its indicate that personality traits have correlation with work engagement and openness to experience is the most influence traits on work engagement, based on both analyses (Pearson correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis). Therefore, there is conglomerate of correlation between the variables. Table 2 shows the summary of the hypotheses results from multiple regression analysis.

**Table 2.** Summary of Hypotheses Results using Multiple Regression Analysis

<b>Hypotheses</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Results</b>
H1	There is positive relationship between Extraversion and work engagement	Supported
H2	There is positive relationship between Agreeableness and work engagement.	Rejected

H3	There is positive relationship between Conscientiousness and work engagement.	Supported
H4	There is negative relationship between Neuroticism and work engagement.	Supported
H5	There is positive relationship between Openness to Experience and work engagement.	Supported

The study focuses its findings on the influence of individual personality traits on employees' work engagement among public university academics. Multiple analysis has been carried out in order to test the hypotheses developed. The results indicates that Big Five personality traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) are correlated with work engagement, where it's aligned with previous studies, however proposed hypothesis been rejected which agreeableness show contradict correlation with previous studies, it probably due to various situational variables which job or organization related issues on work engagement, sample size or misinterpretation by respondents. The rest of the traits explain engaged academicians are assertiveness, trusting, organized, cheerful, high exposures and unconventional to be engaged with work. The result of the study is important as to determine appropriate Human Resource Management (HRM) strategies that might implemented in nearest future, in order to ensure that academics will remain engaged with their tasks and duties.

## 5.0 DISCUSSION

There are two dimensions of implications discern, in concern of institutional and practitioner implication. As stated earlier that has little studies were focus solely on personality traits, so this contribution can be a stepping stone for more outcome of these constructs' literatures. Furthermore, this study can be an indicator for the university management in practice especially HR department itself in future to adequate their organization with a good recruitment and engagement system. Thus, by recruiting a good personality academician may partially guarantee to have lengthy service of engagement in the organization specifically engaged with their tasks. So, its application among academic staffs is a crucial, since academics are the backbone of university and it is necessary for the university management to consider on this aspect.

Future research could be extended into two or more predictors dimension of personality instead of one, for instance the dark traits model that could be tested in future, where more predictors may enrich the outputs on the issue of work engagement. The future research shall also attempt to explore or even compare the engagement issues in both public and private universities by expanding the scope of study. Moreover, throughout the study, researcher noticed that most of these variables tested work setting was in academic setting and very fewer on other work field. Hence, based on this gap, future research is needed and may possibly test on different setting like in plantation, technology or even in textile setting. These setting being suggested due to the high demands of employee that requires best talent to stay, it is because their job duties become more challenging and face rapid changes in delivering preference, thus researchers believe there is high possibilities to have work engagement issue.

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