

Transformational Leadership, Task Significance, Occupational Self-efficacy, and Work Engagement of University Lecturers in China

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to conduct a thorough examination of work engagement and its factors that influence among university lecturers in China. This will broaden the focus and give useful knowledge for improving work engagement within this selected group. Through an extensive literature review, this study identifies transformational leadership, task significance, and occupational self-efficacy as crucial factors influencing work engagement in higher education institutions. By integrating these theoretical frameworks with the current educational landscape this study presents a promising avenue for empirical research to further explore these relationships as well as enhancing educational environment in higher education institutions in developing countries.

Keywords: Work Engagement , Transformational Leadership, Task Significance, Occupational Self-Efficacy.

The current outlook for the world economy remains bleak and uncertain (The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). In the face of a significant socio-economic challenge, researchers and academics worldwide are increasingly examining examples of sustainable success practices within organizations to support efforts in mitigating the crisis' impact on the global economy (Faulks et al., 2021). It is highly desirable for modern public and private institutions to possess employees who are engaged as research has

demonstrated that engagement aligns with elevated levels of innovation, job effectiveness, organizational commitment, and customer contentment (Bakker et al., 2014). However, it appears that low employee engagement remains a pervasive issue across the globe (Zeeshan et al., 2021). According to Gallup report, most organizations lack effective strategies to address the issue of employee engagement, as evidenced by the fact that only 23% of employees worldwide are actively engaged in their jobs, while a significant 77% are underperforming in

terms of their value to employers and personal fulfillment derived from work in 2022 (Gallup, 2023). According to the report, by 2022 the average level of employee engagement in China was only 18%, which falls below the global average (23%). Teachers' work engagement is also insufficient in China (Cheng et al., 2023).

Employee engagement plays a crucial role in enhancing an organization's ability to accomplish its mission, which is particularly significant during current economic challenges (Azeem et al., 2021; Kohir Aman, 2019). Employees assume a critical position as invaluable assets that synergistically amalgamate diverse resources like technology, finance, information, managerial tools, and production systems to facilitate the organization's achievement of a competitive edge (Abdullahi et al., 2023). Fostering work involvement assumes a pivotal role in bolstering teachers' well-being by virtue of its favorable impact on their vitality, commitment, and absorption in their profession (Vujčić et al., 2022). Lecturers who exhibit a profound level of engagement and dedication will mitigate turnover rates while enhancing work efficiency and caliber. The level of engagement exhibited by lecturers can impact their overall job contentment (Perera et al., 2018), while also playing a role in shaping the academic and socio-emotional growth of students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Bakker explained two primary influences on work engagement: personal resources and job resources. Personal resources primarily focus on internal factors within individuals, while job resources refer to external contextual elements that facilitate goal achievement, alleviate job demands, and stimulate individual progress (Bakker et al., 2014). Therefore, based on the findings of Schaufeli & Bakker (2010), both job and personal resources have the potential to enhance work engagement. Li Sun (2019) conducted a comprehensive review of previous studies on the factors influencing employee engagement, categorizing them into three

groups: organizational factors (such as leadership, support from superiors, etc.), job factors (including work environment, task characteristics, etc.), and individual factors (such as extraversion, self-efficacy, etc.). However, it is worth noting that most research on the determinants of employee engagement tends to focus on only one or two out of these three categories. (L. Sun, 2019).

Additionally, existing research on job engagement has primarily examined developed countries in the Western world, such as the Netherlands, the United States, Finland, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and Canada (Abualigah et al., 2023; Bailey et al., 2017a, 2017b; Kossyva et al., 2023), limited research was conducted in non-Western developing countries. By considering past literature and the present circumstances in China, this study presents a avenue for research that connects existing theoretical frameworks with the actual educational landscape. The objective of this study is to examine the associations among transformational leadership, task significance, occupational self-efficacy, and work engagement among university lecturers in China.

Work Engagement

The foundation of work engagement is often attributed to Kahn's publication on Psychological Conditions of Employee Engagement at Work (1990). In his research, Kahn provided a definition for work engagement as the state in which individuals establish strong connections to their roles on physical, cognitive, and emotional levels (Kahn, 1990). The researcher suggests that optimal work engagement occurs when individuals channel their personal energies into physical labor, cognitive vigilance, and emotional commitment (Tee et al., 2022).

Different interpretations of work engagement have been proposed by various scholars. According to Maslach and Leiter (1997), work engagement can be seen as the antithesis of burnout, characterized by a positive

state encompassing increased energy, deep involvement, and a sense of effectiveness (Wright & Bonett, 1997). Conversely, Harter, Schmidt & Hayes (2002) define work engagement as an individual's active participation in their job with satisfaction and accompanied by enthusiasm for their tasks (Harter et al., 2002). According to Schaufeli and his colleagues (2002), work engagement can be described as a positive state of mind experienced in the workplace. It encompasses having abundant energy and mental resilience while performing tasks, demonstrating willingness to invest effort, and persisting through challenges. Work engagement pertains to a state of positive emotional and motivational well-being characterized by elevated vitality, unwavering commitment, and an intense concentration on professional tasks (A. B. Bakker et al., 2014).

Engaged individuals exhibit high levels of energy, enthusiasm, and immersion in their work activities (Hurtienne, Hurtienne & Kempen, 2022). These employees play a pivotal role in steering the organization towards positive outcomes (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). The JD-R model, recognized as the most extensively utilized and referenced engagement model (Gleason et al., 2020). In the JD-R model if the employees have more work or personal related resources, they tend to be more devoted to work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

In terms of work resources, work engagement is enhanced when leaders foster confidence, encourage autonomous decision-making, establish clear objectives and promote accountability. Additionally, leaders who adopt a collaborative management style characterized by integrity, fairness and honesty, cultivate a sense of involvement and value among their team members (Wu & Lee, 2020; Zainab et al., 2022). In terms of work resources, In order to enhance work engagement, it is crucial for employees to acknowledge the importance of their work and comprehend its purpose and significance both for themselves and others (Robertson-smith & Markwick, 2009).

They should feel a sense of impact and take pride in their work (Lamolla et al., 2021). In terms of personal resources, dedicated employees exhibit distinct characteristics compared to their counterparts, encompassing a positive outlook, belief in their abilities, and self-worth. These personal resources empower dedicated employees to exert control over their work environment and consequently foster employee commitment (Contreras et al., 2020; Robertson-smith & Markwick, 2009).

According to Kahn (1990), teachers who are fully engaged in their work tend to be highly involved and exhibit their best selves while on the job. Existing studies have established a connection between lecturer work engagement and favorable outcomes, including increased dedication to the institution, reduced student attrition rates, and improved academic performance. This is primarily due to its potential contribution towards facilitating students' accelerated learning progress (Aboramadan et al., 2020; De Stasio et al., 2019; Ozturk, 2020; Vujčić et al., 2022).

Teachers are also the largest contributors to disciplinary progress and scientific advancement (OKPO, 2023). Innovation is a lever for growth and prosperity in business and society as a whole. The involvement of teachers exhibits a positive correlation with their inclination towards innovative work behavior (Hosseini & Shirazi, 2021). We can equip future global citizens to confront the challenges of the emerging world solely through education.

Ozturk compared the work engagement of teachers in Turkey and the United States, two countries with large cultural differences, and found that about 70% of teachers showed low or lack of engagement in 2020, the root causes of which remain to be further explored (Ozturk, 2020). In 2014, 53% of teachers in England intend to leave the profession (Carr, 2015) and 20% to 27% of faculty members in the US in 2022 experience a low level of motivation resulted from work burnout (Turner & Garvis, 2023).

In early 1993, the Higher Education Department of China identified insufficient teacher engagement as one factor contributing to the deterioration in the quality of higher education in China (Yourong, 2020). Many Chinese scholars have investigated the work engagement of teachers in Chinese universities and found that teachers' work engagement is relatively low (Feng Aiqiu, Linlin, 2015; Su Juan, 2016). At present, China pays attention to the quality of talent training, constantly strengthens teaching reform, and guarantees teaching input from facilities, resources, institutional Settings, etc., but in reality, there is no profound impact on teacher education (Rui, 2020). On the whole, the research generally believes that there is a problem of insufficient engagement of Chinese college teachers.

Transformational Leadership

It is important for leaders to motivate their followers in order for them to enhance their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors towards becoming capable subordinates who can effectively fulfill their job responsibilities (Tang & Tang, 2019). Over time, there has been a shift in how we perceive leadership with an emphasis on its transformative nature since around the mid-1980s. From then onwards until now - particularly from the late 1980s - transformational leadership has become a prominent area of study within the field of leadership research (Mroz et al., 2020).

A transformational leader effectively communicates the vision in a concise and captivating manner, provides guidance on how to achieve the vision, demonstrates confidence and optimism, instills trust in their followers, exemplifies values through symbolic gestures, leads by setting an example, and empowers followers to successfully accomplish the organizational objectives. This process involves fostering dedication towards organizational goals and subsequently enabling followers to attain those goals (Deng et al., 2022; Nawardi & Berliyanti, 2023). By encouraging employees to

think creatively and take proactive approaches (Bass, 1990), transformational leaders strive to transform seemingly mundane daily tasks into stimulating work that imbues a deeper sense of purpose in the employee (Loo et al., 2024).

Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the correlation between transformational leadership and work engagement. Transformational leaders possess the ability to expedite organizational change by influencing workforce attitudes and enhancing job involvement (Gustiah & Nurhayati, 2022; Khan, 2022; Sengkey et al., 2019; Shah, 2021; Smit et al., 2021). Transformational leadership refers to a leader who inspires their followers to transform their lives in order to achieve ambitious goals and visions (Anggraini et al., 2021; Bader et al., 2023). Transformational leaders act as exemplars, rally dedication, and utilize drive, support, stimulation, aspiration, and influential charm to cultivate the growth of followers and organizations. These leaders exhibit greater proactivity in motivating followers while effectively establishing organizational goals that resonate with them (Duțu & Butucescu, 2019; Gautam & -Enslin, 2019).

In terms of lecturers, this implies that transformational leaders emphasize the holistic contribution of delivering exceptional services to students and universities towards organizational objectives. This implies that lecturers who receive support, inspiration, and guidance from their supervisor are more likely to perceive their work as intellectually stimulating and rewarding. Consequently, this fosters an environment where followers feel motivated, devoted, and fully engaged in their work (BaniDoumi, 2022; Nurtjahjani et al., 2021; Purwanto et al., 2023).

However, it is noteworthy that the sample of these studies very few encompass Chinese lecturers. Therefore, it would be valuable to investigate the association between transformational leadership and work engagement specifically among university lecturers in China, in order to determine if the findings from previous research can also be

applied within the Chinese context. Consequently, this study put out the following hypothesis in light of the evaluated literature:

H1: Transformational Leadership has a positive relationship with work engagement.

Task Significance

Task significance have been a prominent focal point in studies investigating the factors contributing to employee engagement. The Job Characteristics Theory (JCT), developed by Hackman and Oldham in 1974, suggests that certain aspects of a job can increase employees' perception of its importance, empower them to take responsibility for their work outcomes, and provide them with a comprehensive understanding of the impact generated by their efforts (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Task significance indicates the level at which a job has a significant impact on both internal and external stakeholders' lives. The potential to significantly enhance an individual's sense of personal responsibility for their work outcomes lies in the third primary characteristic of a job, referred to as task significance (Hackman & Oldham, 1975).

Expanding on Kahn's (1990) model of engagement, May et al. (2004) discovered a positive correlation between improving job content and aligning it with work responsibilities in relation to psychological significance. Based on the research conducted by Saks (2006), a strong association can be observed between work engagement and task significance, as suggested by Hackman and Oldham's theory. (Saks, 2006). Saks (2006) suggested that managers should make an effort to identify and provide resources and benefits that employees consider important. This would generate a feeling of duty among employees to respond with increased levels of involvement. An independent survey of 119 long-serving employees showed that the importance of their tasks had a constructive and significant impact on their level of engagement at work; Individuals with a high perception of task significance are more likely to experience higher levels of commitment and enthusiasm in

their tasks. Conversely, individuals with low-quality task importance may lead to a decline in the level of work engagement (Prameswari, 2019). Hence, it is imperative for organizations to guarantee the availability and efficient dissemination of prospects for significant tasks throughout all hierarchical levels within the firm. Consequently, this study put out the following hypothesis in light of the evaluated literature.

H2: Task Significance has a positive relationship with work engagement.

Occupational Self-Efficacy

Occupational self-efficacy pertains to specific self-efficacy and focuses on evaluating one's confidence in effectively accomplishing the responsibilities associated with their occupation. It relates to an individual's perceived competence in performing job-related tasks successfully (Hirschi, 2012). It has been extensively examined in research with regards to its association with job satisfaction within an organization. It has been investigated more specifically in relation to personal work emotions like engagement and as a motivational factor for continued employment (Bailey et al., 2017b; Makara-Studzinska, Wajda and Lizinczyk, 2020; Tamimi and Sopiah, 2022).

Based on certain researchers' findings, individuals with high self-efficacy exhibit a positive motivational state towards their occupation, such as experiencing increased levels of work engagement (Liu, 2019; Perez-Fuentes et al., 2019; Azila-Gbetteo et al., 2021). Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to actively participate in their profession compared to those with lower levels. According to the theory of personal resources, personal attributes such as self-efficacy play a crucial role in determining an individual's level of engagement at work (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009).

The importance of self-efficacy is emphasized in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory. In their research on this theory,

Bakker and Demerouti (2007) distinguished between workplace resources and personal resources while recognizing the significant role of self-efficacy as a personal resource. It has the potential to motivate employees and enhance their level of work involvement, thereby positively influencing employee engagement. This finding is supported by a recent study conducted by Aslil et al (2020), the results indicated that self-efficacy significantly promotes employee engagement and facilitates organizational citizenship behavior (Aslil et al., 2020). The influence between self-efficacy on employee engagement is strengthened by research conducted by several researchers who showed similar results (Ventura, Salanova and Llorens, 2015; Thandar, 2019; Gao et al., 2022).

In education context, teachers' self-efficacy is perceived as a teacher's belief in his or her ability to succeed in teaching-related tasks (Troesch & Bauer, 2020). It is believed that high teacher efficacy is an important motivational factor encouraging teachers to work harder, persist longer and affect students' learning and attainment (Prewett & Whitney, 2021). A strong sense of teacher efficacy enables instructors to derive satisfaction from their profession while also inspiring them to dedicate additional time and energy towards instruction, resulting in enhanced student learning outcomes and achievements (Marle et al., 2023; Van Gasse et al., 2020; Yoon Yoon et al., 2014).

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the existing studies have included a limited number of lecturers, particularly those employed in universities within China. Therefore, further investigation is necessary to ascertain the applicability of previous research findings within the specific context of China. Consequently, this study put out the following hypothesis in light of the evaluated literature:

H3: Occupational self-efficacy has a positive relationship with work engagement.

Conceptual Framework and Conclusion

Based on the thread of discussion, we develop a conceptual model (Figure1) that proposes relationships between transformational leadership, task significance, occupational self-efficacy and work engagement of university lecturers in China.

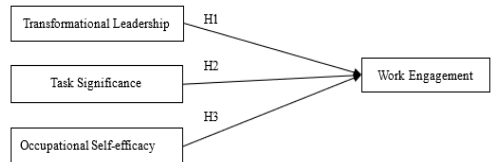


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

This paper provides an analysis of previous research on work engagement and its antecedents among university lecturers in China, aiming to address a specific knowledge gap or issue. It emphasizes the significance and justification for further investigation into this matter. Regarding the managerial implication, this paper provides some opportunities for the improvement of work engagement level of university lecturers. Thus, this preliminary conceptual work actually opens door for further empirical work.

In the initial phase of this study, we pinpointed the research issue and identified gaps in knowledge and formulated hypotheses to establish a conceptual framework (Bryman, 2012). We foresee that a positive correlation between transformational leadership and work engagement, task significance and work engagement, as well as occupational self-efficacy and work engagement. This study intend to adopt PLS approach to analyze the data since predicting the relationship is the main concern, rather than theory testing (Hair et al., 2017). Smart PLS M3 Version 3.9 software will be employed in this regard with the application of a bootstrapping technique to determine the significance levels for loadings and path coefficients. Following the general convention, a two steps approach is considered to assess the

conceptual model, namely the measurement model and the structural model.

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