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HEALTH: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY ON MALAYSIA-BASED
ACADEMICIANS WITH RESILIENCE AS THE MODERATOR**Thiam Yong Kuek¹, I-Chi Chen^{2*}¹ Department of Business and Public Administration, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia
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This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

Concerns regarding mental health among academicians have become increasingly prevalent, particularly as universities aggressively pursue global rankings such as Times Higher Education (THE) and QS. This intensified competitive environment places significant pressure on academicians to continually perform at high levels, often resulting in burnout that affect their mental health. Malaysia-based academicians are not exempt from this phenomenon; however, studies specifically addressing mental health and burnout among this group remain limited. This conceptual paper explores mental health issues among Malaysia-based academicians by examining emotional exhaustion, a critical dimension of burnout. Additionally, this paper proposes resilience as a potential moderator in the relationship between emotional exhaustion and overall mental health among Malaysia-based academicians. Future empirical research based on this conceptualization can guide university management in developing effective interventions and supportive frameworks to address and improve academicians' mental health.

Keywords:

Burnout, Emotional Exhaustion, Mental Health, Resilience, Academicians, Malaysia

Introduction

Mental health issues among academicians have garnered widespread attention globally. According to a report by Kelloway et al. (2023), mental health problems have become one of the primary threats to workforce health worldwide. Globally, the working environment in higher education institutions has become increasingly complex, with academicians facing a growing number of stressors, such as high workloads, research pressures, teaching evaluations, and career development demands (Kinman & Wray, 2013). The workplace stressors create dual effects that degrade both performance quality and mental well-being of employees. Mental health problems affecting academicians exist at high rates throughout the world and continue to increase in frequency (Shin & Jung, 2014). Academicians in higher education institutions demonstrate high rates of mental health disorders. Academicians show high occurrence of stress alongside anxiety and depressive symptoms according to research by Kinman & Wray (2013). Academicians in the United Kingdom demonstrated moderate to severe anxiety symptoms according to research conducted by Kinman and Wray (2013). Similarly, in the United States, research has shown that academicians' mental health issues are closely linked to high workloads and low job satisfaction (Shin & Jung, 2014). In Malaysia, in particular, the mental health of academicians is a significant concern, with many studies suggesting that their mental health levels are notably lower than those of workers in non-service sector (Munusamy et al., 2024). Henny et al. (2014) discovered that Malaysian academician professionals faced burnout at moderate to severe levels which negatively impacted their mental state. The workplace environment of Malaysia-based academicians leads to their mental health problems through excessive workloads and limited career progression opportunities and poor work-life balance (Munusamy et al., 2024).

Academician mental health in Malaysia experiences substantial effects from emotional exhaustion according to Rusdi et al. (2021). The findings of Kinman & Wray (2013) support the observation that academician job satisfaction decreases when exhaustion occurs while producing various mental health problems including anxiety and depression and insomnia. Hence if left unchecked, this phenomenon might affect the academician's productivity, with dire effect on their institution outputs and their students learning process. Although past research has been conducted on academicians' mental health issues and their influencing factors, studies focusing on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and mental health among Malaysia-based academicians remain limited. Studies about academician populations in Western countries predominate while Malaysia-based academician research remains scarce and empirical analysis remains underdeveloped (Munusamy et al., 2024). According to Pau et al. (2022) most Malaysian studies examine school teachers as their main subject. Research today mostly describes mental health problems without conducting sufficient investigation into the relationship between emotional exhaustion and mental health (Kinman & Wray, 2013). The current study explores the relationship between emotional exhaustion and mental health status of academician professionals in Malaysia through an empirical research strategy to address population and empirical research gaps (Miles, 2017).

Literature Review

Underlying Theory: Job Demands-Resources Theoretical Model

As a widely used theoretical foundation in occupational health psychology the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model evaluates how work-environmental elements and stressors affect worker physical and psychological well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). This theory

organizes workplace elements into two fundamental categories which include job demands and job resources. Job demands represent work elements which force employees to use their physical and mental capacities and emotional capabilities through high workload and time constraints and emotional challenges. Job demands that exceed reasonable levels create emotional exhaustion which represents a fundamental aspect of burnout according to Schaufeli and Taris (2014). Job resources encompass elements which enable employees to accomplish their work targets and handle stress and grow professionally through tools like social support along with job autonomy and feedback and career advancement possibilities. Job resources enable employees to manage stress resulting from work demands and simultaneously boost work engagement and well-being which improves mental health (Lesener et al., 2019).

JD-R theory shows better flexibility and universal application than its equivalent theoretical models including Effort-Reward Imbalance model. Since its creation the Effort-Reward Imbalance model examines only the amount of effort workers invest versus their compensation without discussing how workplace resources protect employee mental well-being (van Vegchel et al., 2016). The JD-R theory surpasses the Effort-Reward Imbalance model because it handles negative job demands alongside positive work resources which help reduce stress and enhance mental health thus providing a broader framework to understand workforce health effects. The JD-R theory demonstrates adaptability by enabling researchers to use it across various occupational types and cultural settings from demanding healthcare and education sectors to less demanding fields (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The JD-R theory stands out as an excellent theory for emotional exhaustion and mental health studies because it defines workplace stressors (such as high workload and emotional demands) separately from protective factors (such as social support and autonomy) (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). As the aim of this study is just to examine the effect of emotional exhaustion on academicians' mental health, hence it will not take job demands and job resources constructs into consideration as part of the proposed research framework.

Mental Health at Work

According to the World Health Organization (2022) mental health describes how well someone functions emotionally and psychologically and socially while including both mental illness absence and positive psychological states and social adaptability. The growing social demands of today have made mental health problems into a worldwide issue. Mental health concerns persist to increase across all corners of the planet particularly in areas with elevated stress like the work environments within academia realm (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Mental health conditions create multiple socioeconomic consequences which adversely affect both a person's lifestyle quality as well as healthcare expenses and work output (Bubonya et al., 2017). Mental health now stands as a fundamental matter which has taken centre stage in public health practice. The workplace shows the highest incidence of mental health problems due to work-related stress, occupational burnout, and lack of social support (Navinés et al., 2016). The long-term effect of high-pressure work environments creates anxiety and depression which can progress to serious mental illnesses for workers (Harvey et al., 2021). Mental health problems in the workplace simultaneously create adverse effects on employee physical and mental health while reducing business productivity and increasing staff departures (Johnson et al., 2018). Organizational management now needs to address workplace mental health because it represents a critical matter that cannot be overlooked.

Due to the importance of mental health, past studies demand organizations to establish effective mental health interventions as a solution to this problem. For instance, past literature recognizes psychological counselling services as well as work environment improvements and employee support systems enhancements as proven steps to address the issue (Harvey et al., 2021). In addition, managers should receive training to identify mental health problems in employees while organizations need to create friendly work environments to minimize stress at work (Navinés et al., 2016). Sustainable organizational development and improved employee mental health coexist as the result of these intervention measures. Organizations that administer mental health programs achieve enhanced satisfaction levels among their workers alongside better organizational performance results (Urbina-Garcia, 2020).

Emotional Exhaustion as Burnout

In the academic literature, burnout is a concept that has multiple definitions. As pointed out by Edú-Valsania et al. (2022), the most popular definition is that of Maslach and Jackson (1986). In their argument, burnout is described as a psychological state characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished professional efficacy. It is usually a chronic form of workplace stress that has not been adequately addressed and leads to severe personal and occupational harm. According to prior studies, burnout three fundamental characteristics or dimensions are connected to one another (Nápoles, 2022). Nevertheless, emotional exhaustion is generally assumed to be the most significant and central aspect, which is the key characteristic symptom of burnout (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, 2021). Freeman et al. (2021) stated that it is often regarded as the antecedent to the other two dimensions. Furthermore, Yin et al. (2019) also emphasized that emotional exhaustion is a critical facet of burnout in that it is synonymous with chronic stress. As a result, this study will use emotional exhaustion as the construct for burnout.

Sheng et al. (2023) defined emotional exhaustion as a condition where one becomes over exhausted in terms of emotional energy and physical energy. This phenomenon is well known to be related to chronic exposure to occupational stressors. Moreno-Jiménez et al. (2021) pointed out that the higher the levels of emotional demands and lack of emotional resources from the workplace will enhance the speed of emotional exhaustion if the nature of the work involves interpersonal interactions, as in the education line.

Relationship between Emotional Exhaustion and Mental Health

The influence of burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion on mental health has emerged as a significant subject, particularly in academia research. Research indicates that prolonged exposure in demanding situations poses a major mental health risk to people who experience emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2009). For instance, research on healthcare workers demonstrated that emotional exhaustion created a positive relationship between depressive symptoms and depression incidence while showing that higher emotional exhaustion levels raised the risk for depression (Bianchi et al., 2019). Likewise, academia stakeholders such as academicians and students experience high emotional exhaustion rates due to academic stress and workload alongside emotional demands thus affecting their mental health (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Past studies on primary and secondary school teachers demonstrate that emotional exhaustion creates strong connections to depression and anxiety symptoms and teachers showing higher emotional exhaustion levels experience greater risks of emotional distress and burnout and

insomnia (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Emotional exhaustion intensifies stress and anxiety symptoms when it makes people lose control of their emotions and erodes their access to social support networks (Hülsheger et al., 2013). The presence of emotional exhaustion poses a significant and immediate threat to the mental well-being of higher education academicians. Academician staff emotional exhaustion increases according to research because of their multiple responsibilities including teaching duties and research activities and administrative tasks and the need to secure funding and publish academic work (Bianchi et al., 2019). The emotional exhaustion experienced by university faculty directly leads to depression symptoms and anxiety and chronic stress which negatively affects their mental well-being (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Academicians who experience emotional exhaustion show higher susceptibility to mental health problems that intensify when such issues remain untreated, according to Hülsheger et al. (2013). The reduction of learning motivation and self-efficacy by emotional exhaustion creates adverse mental health effects as described by Salmela-Aro et al. (2017). The study shows emotional exhaustion exists in widespread fashion across educational institutions affecting both students and teachers mentally thus requiring authorities to develop effective solutions.

Hence, the following proposition was proposed;

P_1 : Emotional exhaustion has a negative significant impact on academician's mental health.

Resilience at Work

Resilience describes how well a person adjusts alongside maintaining recovery from stressful or traumatic situations (Smith et al., 2018). Psychologists first developed the concept which demonstrates people both sustain from normal operation and develop through difficult experiences (Luthar et al., 2015). According to Masten (2018), resilience contains psychological traits such as optimism together with self-efficacy and emotional regulation but requires environmental elements including social support and available resources. Southwick et al. (2014) demonstrate that resilience functions as a dynamic process which people can develop through learning and training methods. The research on resilience has shifted its focus to organizational behavior specifically for workplace applications during the past few years.

Resilience at work refers to employee's ability to maintain a positive mindset and handle the work pressure (Cooper et al., 2019). It is important nowadays to increase or maintain employee's high work performance, considering the modern work-related complexity and challenges. Research by Shin et al. (2012) demonstrates workplace resilience enables staff members to manage intense work demands together with uncertain situations and burnout. Resilient employees demonstrate better coping abilities by adapting their thinking patterns and discovering solution methods to minimize negative emotions when they encounter heavy workloads or unexpected organizational transformations (Kuntz et al., 2016). The level of workplace resilience shows direct correlation to both the satisfaction levels of employees as well as their performance at work. Strong resilience among employees leads to enhanced work engagement and creativity which allows them to deliver high performance under stressful situations (King et al., 2016).

The process of developing workplace resilience requires both psychological traits of individual employees and suitable organizational environments. Organization success in fostering resilience among employees arises from creating nurturing workplaces together with training programs and psychological support tools. The research has demonstrated that supportership

leadership approaches combined with authentic communication and employee decision-making responsibilities create substantial benefits for employee resilience levels (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). The organization provides access to mental health resources together with stress management training and resilience development programs so employees can enhance their capability to handle business challenges (Knight et al., 2017). These initiatives deliver both organizational competitiveness enhancement together with individual resilience improvements.

Resilience as the Moderator between Emotional Exhaustion and Mental Health

Emotional regulation abilities improve through resilience allowing people to stay emotionally balanced when facing work-related stress. People use cognitive and behavioural approaches to control their emotions according to Gross (2015). People who demonstrate resilient behaviour typically develop superior capabilities to regulate their emotions which helps them manage negative emotions in challenging situations effectively before their emotional resources become unmanageable. Studies demonstrate that resilient people tend to implement cognitive reappraisal methods to reinterpret stressful situations because these methods help decrease negative emotional responses (Smith et al., 2018). Through this approach people decrease their emotional exhaustion while simultaneously preserving their positive outlook which minimizes mental health deterioration. An individual who practices resilience learns to employ proactive coping methods which heightens their stress management abilities.

The coping methods divide into two groups: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping according to Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Problem-focused coping enables people to directly tackle problems which reduce stressors but emotion-focused coping helps them control their emotional responses to stress. People with strong resilience adopt problem-focused coping techniques because these methods help them better handle occupational stress and decrease their risk of emotional exhaustion according to Yörük & Güler (2021). Highly resilient people handle heavy workloads by developing thorough work schedules and getting help from colleagues and improving their abilities instead of letting emotional distress control them. Resilience helps shield against mental health deterioration stemming from emotional exhaustion because it strengthens a person's internal belief of competence and sense of connection to others. Self-efficacy describes the confidence individuals have to perform particular tasks according to Bandura (1997). High resilience levels in people lead to stronger self-efficacy that increases their ability to handle stress and decreases their risk of emotional exhaustion. The development of resilience leads to improved social support perceptions since individuals believe they can access necessary help from others (Southwick et al., 2016). The perception of social support both emotionally comforts people while providing useful help which reduces work-related stress's impact on mental health.

Hence, the following proposition was proposed;

P_2 : Resilience will moderate the impact of emotional exhaustion on academician's mental health, such that the impact will be weaker when resilience is stronger.

The proposed research framework for this study is shown in Figure 1.

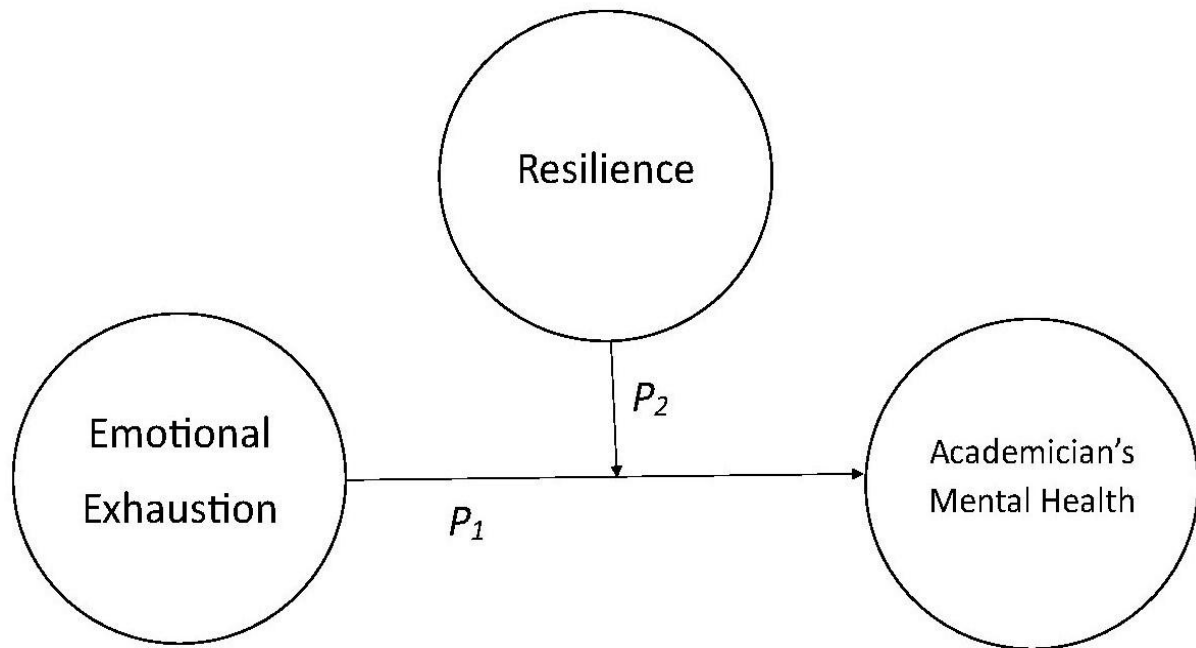


Figure 1: Proposed Research Framework

Methodology

This study uses a cross-sectional quantitative design with partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) as its analytical method. Researchers will gather primary data through questionnaires where respondents will complete on their own. As suggested by Hair et al. (2010), sample size of at least 200 university academicians throughout Malaysian 13 states and 3 federal territories are expected in this study. The quota sampling technique, selecting 13 university academicians per state or federal territory, will be applied first, followed by the convenience sampling technique in this study. During the three-month data collection period, research assistants will be utilized to perform distribution and collection tasks for the surveys. Researchers will request and obtain ethical approval from the research ethics committee of the relevant institution prior data collection. This study will utilize measurement items from previous studies which will undergo comprehensive validity and reliability tests to establish their construct validity. Academician mental health will be assessed using items adapted from the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), which was developed by Goldberg et al. (1997) to measure mental health. Emotional exhaustion on the other hand, will be measured from adapted Emotional Exhaustion subscale items, extracted from MBI-Educators Survey (MBI-ES) (Maslach et al., 1996). Resilience will be evaluated with items adapted from the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008). Marker variable technique will be used to address common method bias since this study utilize single source in collecting both independent and dependent variables data. Hence, Miller and Simmering (2023) 7 items from Attitude Toward the Colour Blue will be adopted and incorporated into the questionnaire for this purpose. Researchers will perform data cleaning through SPSS and use SmartPLS 4 for the data analysis.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to establish that emotional exhaustion has an impact on the mental health of academicians; second, to demonstrate that resilience has a moderating effect on the relationship between emotional exhaustion and academicians' mental health. In the future, it is anticipated that the empirical findings of this study will make a contribution to the literature review of the JD-R theoretical model, particularly with regard to organisational behaviour within Malaysian higher education institutions. UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number three, which focusses on promoting good health and well-being, is aligned with this. From practitioner perspective, the management team of higher education institutions will have a greater knowledge of the impact that emotional exhaustion has on the mental state of academicians and the significance of effectively managing it. Because of this, the management team ought to make sure that the essential measures are in place to protect the mental health of the academicians from the severe state of emotional exhaustion being experienced and increase the academicians' resilience for a more effective safeguards against the exhaustion.

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