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FAIRNESS AS A SHIELD: ORGANISATIONAL JUSTICE, COMMITMENT AND EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION AMONG MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY ACADEMICS

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Abstract:

This conceptual study explores the relationship between organisational justice and emotional exhaustion among academics in Malaysian universities, drawing on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theoretical model. It posits that organisational justice, encompassing fairness acts as a crucial job resource that can alleviate emotional exhaustion—a key dimension of burnout. Additionally, the research examines the moderating role of organisational commitment, proposing that highly committed academics may experience a stronger protective effect of organisational justice against emotional exhaustion. The study fills a gap in the literature by integrating organisational justice into the JD-R framework and highlighting its role in academic well-being. By emphasizing the importance of fair organisational practices, this research offers insights for higher education leaders to create supportive environments that reduce burnout. It underscores the value of fostering organisational commitment to mitigate emotional exhaustion and improve overall academic performance and well-being.

Keywords:

Burnout, Emotional Exhaustion, Organisational Justice, Organisational Commitment, Academics, Malaysia

Introduction

Burnout is recognised as a major occupational health concern across sectors and countries. World Health Organization defines burnout as “... syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, characterised by energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance or cynicism toward one’s job, and reduced professional efficacy” (World Health Organization, 2019). This is consistent with the scholarly view of burnout as a multidimensional, work-related syndrome comprising emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation or cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022).

Among the burnout dimensions, emotional exhaustion—feelings of being overextended and depleted of emotional and physical resources—has consistently been identified as the critical component and most important manifestation of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). It is a powerful indicator of other aspects of burnout, and unfavourable outcomes, including well-being (Aronsson et al., 2017). As a result, many empirical studies focus specifically on emotional exhaustion as a key indicator of burnout risk in high-demand sectors, such as in health care and education.

In the recent decades, higher education sector has experienced a quick and widespread change that includes massification, internationalisation, strengthening of accountability regimes and the increased competition of students, research financing, and international rankings. In Malaysia, the sector is clearly mandated by the Malaysia government to become a global player, with challenging goals in terms of research output, global presence and revenue. Publications, grant acquisition, post graduate supervision and community engagement are some of the key performance indicators (KPIs) that have increased work pressures on academics in both public universities and private institutions (Teoh and Kee, 2022). Empirical research at Malaysian universities indicates that academicians are reporting high rates of burnout and psychological distress, with academics are more likely to experience burnout than non-academics (Mohamed et al., 2021). In addition, other Malaysian related studies have reported high levels of academic burnout in lecturers in public institutions of higher learning (Omar et al., 2016) and a medium to high degree of emotional exhaustion among academic administrators (Ahmad et al., 2021). Studies that concentrate on Malaysian research universities also propose that high job demands and low job resources are among the essential factors that contribute to burnout in academics (Teoh and Kee, 2022). Collectively, these studies suggest that emotional exhaustion among academics in Malaysia is not only prevalent but may be structurally embedded in how academic work is organised, evaluated, and rewarded.

Much of the Malaysian literature has emphasised job demands, psychosocial safety climate, and work engagement as predictors, mediators, or buffers of burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion (Teoh & Kee, 2022). In contrast, comparatively less attention has been paid to organisational justice, which is increasingly recognised as a critical job resource in contemporary workplaces (Clements & Kinman, 2022; Ren et al., 2021; Snyman et al., 2023). Organisational justice refers to employees’ perceptions of fairness in organisational outcomes, procedures, interpersonal treatment, and information sharing (Colquitt, 2001). Evidence indicates that low workplace justice is associated with higher emotional exhaustion, whereas high workplace justice can function as a protective factor against burnout (Aronsson et al., 2017). For example, Claponea and Iorga (2023) found that perceptions of organisational justice

were closely linked to burnout dimensions, including emotional exhaustion, in high-strain healthcare settings. These findings imply that how fairly workloads, rewards, promotion criteria, and performance evaluations are perceived may be as important for academics' emotional exhaustion as the absolute level of demands they face.

In the Malaysian higher education context, there is a paucity of empirical research examining how organisational justice shapes emotional exhaustion among academics in Malaysian universities. Current Malaysian literature on burnout is largely focused on exploring burnout within the context of job demands and personal coping strategies, with less emphasis on the idea of justice as a job resource at the organisational level (Ahmad et al., 2021; Mohamed et al., 2021; Teoh and Kee, 2022). Without the provision of context-sensitive evidence by the Malaysian higher education sector, academic institutions have little empirical informational provision, thus limiting the design and enactment of justice-based interventions. Addressing this empirical and population research gap is crucial, as organisational justice is amenable to policy and managerial intervention and may offer a promising avenue for reducing emotional exhaustion and enhancing the well-being and performance of academics in Malaysian universities.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation in this Study

In this study, the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theoretical model revised by Schaufeli & Bakker (2004) is partially adopted to conceptualise organisational justice as a key job resource that protects employees from burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion. The JD-R framework proposes that job resources foster well-being and buffer the negative effects of job demands on strain outcomes such as exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Organisational justice, typically captured through distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational dimensions (Colquitt, 2001), is therefore positioned as a contextual resource that can reduce emotional exhaustion by signalling support, predictability, and respect. To extend JD-R theory, this research introduces organisational commitment as a moderator of the justice–exhaustion relationship. Drawing on the three-component conceptualisation of organisational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991), highly committed employees may be more responsive to fairness cues, such that organisational justice more strongly alleviates emotional exhaustion among employees with stronger attachment to the organisation. Conversely, when commitment is low, the resource value of justice perceptions may be attenuated, weakening their protective effect on burnout. Framing organisational justice as a job resource and organisational commitment as a boundary condition thus refines and extends JD-R by specifying for whom fairness in the workplace is most effective in reducing emotional exhaustion.

Emotional Exhaustion as Burnout

Burnout is a psychological syndrome caused by chronic work-related stress, characterized by three core dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Emotional exhaustion, the core element of burnout, is a state of extreme fatigue caused by the long-term depletion of emotional and cognitive resources, which is characterized by depleted energy, reduced motivation, and physical and mental fatigue (Schaufeli et al., 2020). In the workplace, emotional exhaustion is often caused by excessive job demands, low autonomy, role ambiguity, and a lack of job resources (Demerouti et al., 2014). Furthermore, the pervasive influence of technology exacerbates

emotional exhaustion (Derks et al., 2014), blurring the boundaries between work and personal life and heightening the risk of burnout.

In institutions of higher education, academics experience unique occupational stressors that exposed them to emotional exhaustion (Kinman & Wray, 2014). Academic work is characterized by several competing roles, such as teaching, research, administrative and service obligations, which frequently put a strain on limited time and energy (Pekrun et al., 2019). Research shows that faculty members of universities are often subjected to the pressure of publish or perish, as well as to the growing number of teaching reviews and the bureaucratic burden (Watts & Robertson, 2011). In addition, the shift towards neoliberal managerialism in public universities has exacerbated this by fostering a culture of performativity, audit, and perceived loss of professional autonomy, which diminishes one's sense of control—a key psychological resource (Guthrie et al., 2018). In institutions of higher education, academics experience unique occupational stressors that exposed them to emotional exhaustion (Kinman & Wray, 2014). Academic work is characterized by several competing roles, such as teaching, research, administrative and service obligations, which frequently put a strain on limited time and energy (Pekrun et al., 2019). Research shows that faculty members of universities are often subjected to the pressure of publish or perish, as well as to the growing number of teaching reviews and the bureaucratic burden (Watts & Robertson, 2011). In addition, the shift towards neoliberal managerialism in public universities has exacerbated this by fostering a culture of performativity, audit, and perceived loss of professional autonomy, which diminishes one's sense of control—a key psychological resource (Guthrie et al., 2018). The same trends can be observed in Malaysia as well. According to a recent systematic review of Malaysian academics, there are high burnout rates, especially emotional exhaustion due to more job demands and limited resources (Munusamy et al., 2024). To add to this, the studies on Malaysian research universities reveal that high job demands and low job resources are linked to increased emotional exhaustion in academics (Teoh et al., 2021).

Job resources such as autonomy, supervisor support or professional growth opportunity, perform an immediate motivational task buffering against exhaustion by building resilience, encouraging goal achievement as well as motivating personal growth. To the academics, the absence of such resources such as inadequate feedback, reduced decision-making scope, or perceived injustice in the reward and recognition system will reduce their capabilities to cope and engage against the demands (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). Consequently, emotional exhaustion among academics is not only the effect of high pressure but it is deeply rooted in the lack of balance in which individual demands are not matched with the resources provided by the institutions and society as a whole, which is systematic in the way that it deprives them of their emotional capital. Hence, resource-based emphasis is consistent with global findings in reducing emotional exhaustion and it is applicable within Malaysian higher education environment (Cao et al., 2024; Koster et al., 2023; Munusamy et al., 2024).

Organisational Justice at Work

Organisational justice refers to employees' perceptions of fairness in organisational decisions, distributions, and interactions (Greenberg, 1987). Employee attitudes and behaviours together with job satisfaction and organisational commitment and performance emerge as key elements that organisational justice strongly affects (Colquitt et al., 2001). The three fundamental components of organisational justice include distributive justice together with procedural justice and interactional justice. The three dimensions of organisational justice include

distributive justice which evaluates resource distribution fairness and procedural justice which examines process transparency and consistency and interactional justice which assesses respectful interpersonal treatment (Bies, 1986). Organisational justice stands as a vital job resource (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) because it enables employees to manage work stress while boosting work engagement and maintaining well-being. Job resources according to Demerouti et al. (2001) support employees in their work goals and stress reduction and personal development. The role of organisational justice as a job resource enables employees to develop psychological safety while fostering positive work attitudes together with beneficial work behaviours (Robbins et al., 2012). The justice system within higher education institutions determines how academics experience their work and pursue their careers. Academic work typically comes with substantial pressure because employees must meet requirements for research production and teaching standards along with administrative duties (Winter & O'Donohue, 2012).

Organisational justice functions as a job resource by offering academics psychological support together with career security in their professional environment. Academic performance and job satisfaction alongside professional commitment and research productivity significantly improve when academics experience organisational justice according to Tyler and Blader (2013). Academics experience greater work motivation and sense of belonging when research resources are distributed fairly and promotion procedures are transparent and communication maintains respectful openness (Lambert et al., 2007). Studies of Malaysian universities and polytechnics show that justice perceptions are linked to higher self-perceived performance among expatriate academics, stronger organisational citizenship behaviours, and greater affective commitment among academic staff when fair procedures and outcomes operate through constructive conflict-management styles (integrating and compromising) (Manaf et al., 2014; Awang & Wan Ahmad, 2015; Kassim et al., 2018). Justice also matters for appraisal systems: in a Malaysian public higher educational institution, where it correlated strongly with performance-appraisal satisfaction, with notable differences between academic and non-academic staff (Saraih et al., 2017). Academic burnout together with turnover intentions and academic misconduct become more likely when academic institutions practice unjust practices (Croppanzano et al., 2001).

Organisational Commitment as Contingent Factor

Organisational commitment is one of the key constructs in organisational behaviour, which defines the psychological attachment and loyalty of employees to their respective organisations (Allen & Meyer, 1990). The three-component model of commitment consisting of affective, continuance and normative has been the most prevailing model and has been largely associated with job satisfaction, job performance, citizen behaviour and turnover intentions (Meyer et al., 2002). In general, the antecedents are leadership, organisational support, job characteristics, and demographic variables (Bashir et al., 2020; Yahaya & Ebrahim, 2016).

Organisational commitment among academics in higher education is commonly influenced by the pressures and expectations specific to the sector. For instance, commitment is heavily predetermined by research agendas: discovery-oriented agendas are related to affective and normative commitment, and more conservative agendas are associated with continuance commitment (Zhang & Xie, 2023). Broader antecedents, such as leadership, work environment and quality of work life are equally important as well (Chen et al., 2024).

Past studies conducted in Malaysia provide relevant insights in this research area. Academic leadership that embodied charismatic influence and adaptive ability is found to contribute greatly to the level of commitment among academic staff in Malaysian public universities (Asaari et al., 2016). The work-life quality construct has a positive influence on the organisational commitment, which, in its turn, mediates the aspect of the organisational commitment and the academics job performance in Malaysian universities (Ehido et al., 2024). Similarly, organisational commitment has been reported to create a sense of career success whereby career commitment mediates this process (Safin et al., 2024). On the contrary, low level of commitment is a sign of intention to leave among academics in private higher education institutions in Malaysia, with affective and normative commitment acting as the buffer against it (Ramli & Salleh, 2025). Furthermore, research in Islamic higher education institutions shows that commitment to change is associated with change-related behaviours. Specifically, affective commitment encourages cooperation and advocacy for change, whereas continuance commitment is more closely tied to compliance (Noor et al., 2023).

Linking Organisational Justice, Emotional Exhaustion and Organisational Commitment

Organisational justice and emotional exhaustion are closely linked constructs that help explain why some employees remain engaged and healthy at work while others become depleted and burned out. According to Haines et al. (2025), justice is a critical psychosocial resource. Fair procedures and equitable outcomes for instance, signal that the organisation values and protects employees' resources. In contrast, perceptions of injustice such as unexplained workload changes, indicate resource loss or threat, thereby activating stress responses that can culminate in emotional exhaustion (Cohen-Serrins, 2024).

A substantial body of research shows that low organisational justice is associated with higher burnout and emotional exhaustion. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that perceived injustice is consistently related to poorer physical and mental health, including stress-related outcomes (Robbins et al., 2012) and affective strain such as burnout and psychological distress (Sarnecki et al., 2024). Studies in various service sectors typically find that each of the organisational justice dimensions; distributive, procedural, and interactional justice, show negative associations with burnout, particularly its emotional exhaustion dimension (Colquitt et al., 2001; Shkoler & Tziner, 2017).

Benk and Kenek (2024) research suggest that employees who perceive justice in their organisations are less likely to feel drained, even in demanding contexts such as healthcare and higher education. This is consistent with resource-based theories; justice is the protective resource that buffers the impact of high job demands on resource loss and emotional fatigue (Hobfoll, 1989). The mechanisms linking organisational justice to emotional exhaustion operate through both cognitive and emotional pathways. Cognitively, justice reduce ambiguity and perceptions of arbitrariness, thereby lowering stress related to uncertainty and unpredictability (Greenberg, 1990). Emotionally, justice convey dignity and relational value, which reduce negative affect that otherwise fuels exhaustion over time (Maslach et al., 2001; Colquitt, 2001).

In the higher education sector, academic work is characterised by high demands, inadequate resources and multiple roles with accountability pressures. Past research show that university staff are exposed to substantial occupational stress. Winefield et al. (2003) reported significant psychological strain among Australian university staff, with academic staff faring worse than

general staff. Likewise, Tytherleigh et al. (2005) reported significant stress levels among UK higher education academics, where job insecurity and role conflict were the primary stressors due to the scarcity of resources. Within this context, organisational justice is particularly salient as a job resource. If the allocation of these resources is perceived as unfair, or if procedures are seen as opaque and inconsistent, the perceived violation of fairness norms can amplify stressors associated with already high job demands. Such strain and stress create optimal conditions for emotional exhaustion among academics.

Bauwens et al. (2019) studied performance management justice on academics within a European university and showed that perceived justice in performance management processes was associated with lower burnout. Distributive and interactional justice in performance evaluations were particularly important in reducing burnout and, indirectly, promoting organisational citizenship behaviour. The results indicated the protective nature of fair appraisal systems and supportive feedback in reducing the emotional exhaustion among faculty members in universities despite the growing trend in reliance on performance evaluation systems in institutions of higher learning.

These higher education-specific studies align with broader justice-health findings. They suggest that when universities demonstrate justice, academic staff are less likely to experience emotional exhaustion. The sense of injustice can lead to exhaustion of emotional resources of academics and worsen burnout. (Bauwens et al., 2019; Safari et al., 2012; Winefield et al., 2003).

Hence, following proposition is proposed;

P₁: Organisational Justice Is Negatively Associated with Academics' Emotional Exhaustion.

Organisational commitment can be conceived as a salient personal resource that modulates the relationship between organisational justice and emotional exhaustion among academics in institutions of higher learning. It has been demonstrated that higher perceptions of justice are related to lower levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion partly due to the fact that fair treatment strengthens affective commitment and professional identity (Li, 2014; Xue et al., 2025). At the same time, the studies of academics have found that the increased organisational commitment is associated with the reduced burnout and lower turnover intentions, but the strong burnout undermines the commitment to the university (Parmar et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest that committed academics tend to view fair procedures as the expressions of mutual investment and reciprocity, thus intensifying the resource-enhancing effects of justice, and blunting lessening the effects of occasional injustices on the emotional exhaustion. On the other hand, when organisational commitment is low; perceptions of injustice are more likely to be conceived in a manner that makes them appear more threatening and identity-relevant, increasing the strain and accelerating the exhaustion of emotional resources. Therefore, organisational commitment in the context of the higher learning institutions is expected to overcome the negative impact of the lack of organisational justice on emotional exhaustion and improve the protective role of strong justice, making it a critical moderator of the faculty members well-being (Li, 2014; Parmar et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2020; Xue et al., 2025).

Accordingly, following proposition is proposed:

P₂: Organisational Commitment Moderates the Relationship Between Organisational Justice and Academics' Emotional Exhaustion.

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

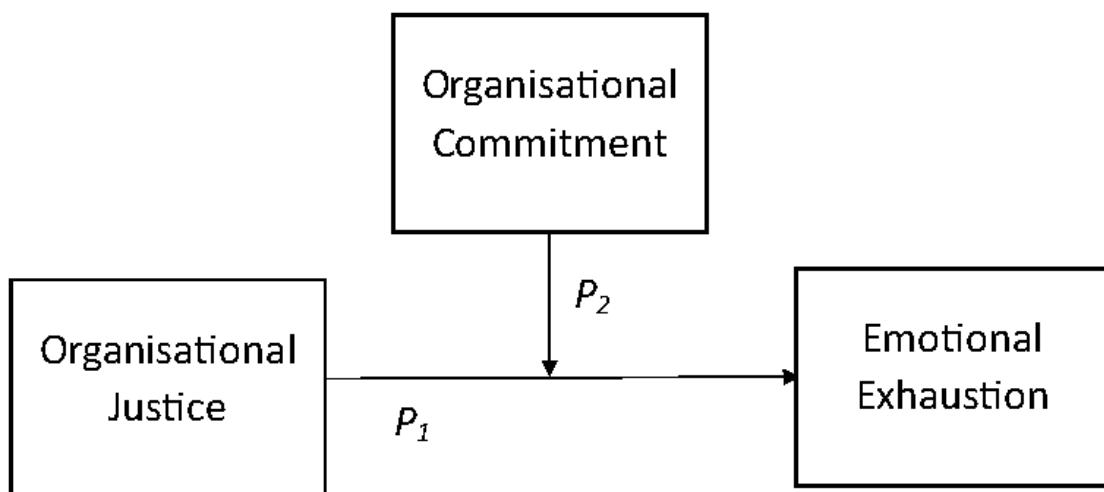


Figure 1: Proposed Research Framework

Methodology

This quantitative study will employ structural equation modelling (SEM) as the primary analytical technique. Data will be collected using a self-administered online questionnaire distributed to target respondents. A sample size of at least 200 university academics across Malaysia is expected, in line with Hair et al. (2010). A non-probability mixed sampling technique will be used. Specifically, quota sampling of at least 34 university academics per region will be employed, followed by convenience sampling. Researchers will obtain ethical clearance from the research ethics committee before commencing fieldwork. The emotional exhaustion construct will be measured using items adapted from the Emotional Exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Educators Survey (MBI-ES) (Maslach et al., 1996). Items from the organisational commitment scale developed by Meyer et al. (1993) will be adapted to measure organisational commitment; the hierarchical component model (HCM) approach will be applied to this construct due to its three-dimensional structure. Perceived overall justice (POJ) scale items developed by Ambrose and Schminke (2009) will be adapted to measure organisational justice. In addition, items from the Attitude Toward the Color Blue scale by Miller and Simmering (2023) will be adopted as a marker variable to assess common method bias. Pre-tests will be conducted to examine content and face validity before the questionnaire is distributed to respondents. The collected data will be screened and cleaned using SPSS, and subsequently analysed using SmartPLS 4.

Conclusion

This conceptual study applies the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) theoretical model to examine how organisational justice functions as a key organisational level job resource influencing emotional exhaustion among Malaysian university academics, with organisational commitment proposed as a moderating mechanism. The study is expected to contribute to the

theoretical knowledge in few ways. Firstly, it expands JD-R model to make organisational justice a core job resource, a position that will serve in alleviating the strain process leading to emotional exhaustion. Secondly, the inclusion of organisational commitment as a moderator adds novelty to the existing theory as it explains the manner of the interaction between the personal-level resources and organisational conditions. Academics who are more committed might be better in perceive justice or injustice in ways that help alleviate emotional pressure and provide a more dynamic view in the JD-R paradigm.

At a managerial level, this framework highlights how the organisational fair practices are critical towards protecting the academic well-being. Leaders must understand that open procedural processes, even-handed distribution of tasks, and positive interpersonal behaviours are not administrative issues by themselves, but are part and parcel that would ensure that the academics are not affected by emotional exhaustion. These benefits can be further increased by improving organisational commitment via supportive leadership, recognition systems and career development opportunities. Higher education institutions can contribute to healthier, more sustainable working environments by promoting commitment, which in turn will contribute to better staff well-being and performance of the institutions.

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