



Research Journal of
**Business
Management**

ISSN 1819-1932



Academic
Journals Inc.

www.academicjournals.com

The Effects of Emotional Intelligence and Gender on Work Engagement of Customer-Contact Employees: A Proposed Framework

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ABSTRACT

A substantial body of research has advocated that work engagement has positive outcomes for employees. However, little research has been conducted on the predictors of work engagement in the hotel industry. Therefore, the objective of this study is to present a proposed model linking emotional intelligence and work engagement among customer-contact employees. Given the fact that gender differs in regards to their work attitude, it has been proposed as a moderator in the above-mentioned relationship. A review of the literature to support the proposed linkage within the Malaysian hotel industry is provided.

Key words: Work engagement, emotional intelligence, gender, customer-contact employees, hotels

INTRODUCTION

Service sector has been a key player in the growth of the Malaysian economy. Statistic showed that service sector contributed as much as 57% to Malaysia's GDP in 2009. By 2020, it has been estimated that the service sector would contribute as much as 70% to Malaysia's GDP. Among the service sectors, the tourism industry is relatively important. Tourism industry is the fifth largest industry that plays a significant role to Malaysia's economy after oil, gas and energy, financial services, wholesale and retail and palm oil. In terms of contribution to the national gross income, tourism industry generated RM36.9 billion to the Malaysia Gross National Income (GNI) in 2009. This is due to the growth in the number of tourist arrivals to Malaysia from 7.4 million in 1990 to approximately 24.6 million in 2010 (TM, 2011). With this growth, it is projected that by 2020, the tourism industry will be able to contribute as much as RM103.6 billion in GNI, with arrivals of 36 million tourists to the country (http://www.commonwealthministers.com/ministries/ministry_of_information_communication_and_culture_2_2011/).

In the tourism industry, hotels is claimed to be an important supportive sub-sector of tourism (Zailani *et al.*, 2006). Besides that, hotel industry is complementing the expansion of both domestic and inbound tourism (Awang *et al.*, 2008). In fact, hotel industry is one of the most promising industries in Malaysia as it created employment opportunities for the nation; support the growth of secondary activities such as material and equipment suppliers (Awang *et al.*, 2008). The remarkable increase in tourist arrivals over the years has resulted in the rapid development and construction of hotels in Malaysia. However, despite the growth in tourist arrivals, statistic from the Ministry of Tourism reported that the yield per tourist is relatively low compared to our

neighbor countries such as Singapore and Thailand. The yield per tourist for Malaysia was RM2,260 while the yield per tourist was RM3,106 and RM3,785 for Singapore and Thailand, respectively. According to the ministry, one of the causes in low yield per tourist can be attributed to the lower rate of the Malaysian hotels charge. The Malaysian five star hotel is averagely charging about RM320 per night while the Singaporean hotel is charging about RM766 per night. Relatively, the room rate in Malaysia is about 60% cheaper than Hotels in Singapore. As one of the strategies to improve the service quality (as to attract more talents in hotel management and to attract new investments in hotels industry) and to increase the yield per tourist, the Malaysia Tourism Ministry has decided to set a minimum room rate for four and five star hotels in Malaysia with effective from year 2013. The enforcement of this regulation brings two implications to the Malaysian hotel industry. Firstly, it will enable hoteliers to generate sufficient return to their investment. Secondly, the increment in room rates forces hotels to provide higher quality services to customers to balance up the amount of money spent by customers (http://www.commonwealthministers.com/ministries/ministry_of_information_communication_and_culture_2_2011/).

At this point, it is worth for us to ponder if the hotel industry in Malaysia is ready to offer a high level of service quality to their customer as to balance up the amount of money paid by customers. Lau *et al.* (2005) in their study on customer's perceptions of service quality offered by the Malaysian hotels reported that the service quality is below the customer's expectations. Lau *et al.* (2005) urged that "more effort should be put in by the hotel operators to improve service quality of the hotel industry in Malaysia." Hence, it becomes necessary for hotels in Malaysia to acquire the knowledge of the factors that determine service quality quickly. This is because enhancement in service quality will lead to higher customer satisfaction.

It has been widely acknowledged that positive attitude such as work engagement among the service employees is one of the mechanism in eliciting positive work outcomes (Bakker *et al.*, 2004; Salanova *et al.*, 2005; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009). Past literatures suggested that engaged employees are highly energetic, self-efficacious individuals who will exercise influence over events that affect their lives (Bakker *et al.*, 2010). Salanova *et al.* (2005) postulated that work engagement among service employees is the determinant of service quality and customer retention. In this regard, Yang (2010) advanced that among the service employees in hotels, customer-contact employees are the most important group of employees. Yang (2010) asserted that the attitude and behavior of customer-contact employees has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. This is because customer-contact employees would have a high frequency of contacts with the customers and are the main actors in the delivery of service quality (Bettencourt and Brown, 2003; Bettencourt *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, customer-contact employees also serve as the contact point between customers and organization. This implied that they would provide the first and primary impression of the organization to customers (Schneider and Bowen, 1985; Wang, 2009). All these factored to the importance of promoting work engagement among customer-contact employees as a mean to enhance a hotel's level of service quality.

In recent years, numerous studies have been conducted on the predictors of work engagement. However, most of the researches are centered on Western countries such as the Netherlands (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007) Spain (Salanova *et al.*, 2005), Finland (Hakanen *et al.*, 2006; Mauno *et al.*, 2007) and Greece (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009). Despite the importance of work engagement in the hotel industry, studies that explore this variable are still limited (Karatepe and Olugbade, 2009). Besides, existing studies were relatively fragmented in terms of

the variables being investigated. In the case of Malaysia, research published on work engagement is still in its infancy (Abdul Hamid and Yahya, 2011). A review of the literature indicates that emotional resources is one of the important resources that elicit more positive attitude from employees which in turn, can help enhance their performance and other positive behavioral outcomes (Carmeli and Josman, 2006; Jung and Yoon, 2011; Korkmaz and Arpacl, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2011; Wong and Law, 2002). Given the fact that customer-contact employees are crucial in creating and providing good service quality (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996) coupled with the rise of issue to increase yield per tourist in hotel industry, an understanding of the predictors of work engagement among customer-contact employees in hotels has become increasingly relevant. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to propose a linkage between emotional resources and work engagement among customer-contact employees in hotels. Given the fact that there are both males and females workers that work as a customer-contact employee in hotels, the effect of gender has been identified as a potential moderator in the proposed relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work engagement: There are many views of work engagement. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) viewed work engagement as a motivational construct. They defined work engagement as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption.” Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience in works, where the employees are willing to invest their effort in their work and being persistence even in the face of difficulties; dedication means sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge at work while absorption is characterized as fully concentrated, happy and deeply engrossed in one’s work whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulty detaching oneself from work. Subsequently, Schaufeli *et al.* (2006) advocated that work engagement is not a momentary and specific state but rather a persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state which is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behavior. The work engagement construct has been further refined whereby some researchers suggested that engaged worker is different with workaholics in the sense that engaged worker viewed work as fun but not obsessed with their work like workaholics (Bakker *et al.*, 2008). In addition, previous studies have also shown that work engagement can be discriminated from Type-A behavior (Hallberg *et al.*, 2007). Some scholars view the concept of work engagement as being overlapped with some other positive motivational constructs such as organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior and job involvement (May *et al.*, 2004; Robinson *et al.*, 2004). In a recent meta-analysis by Christian *et al.* (2011), the construct of work engagement was found to be positively correlated with job satisfaction ($M_p = 0.53$) and organizational commitment ($M_p = 0.59$). However, despite these linkages, a study by Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) provided support that work engagement is a distinct concept theoretically and empirically.

To date, there are several instruments to measure work engagement. The most widely used scales is Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). There are two versions of UWES scales, UWES comprised of 17-items and while the shortened version consisted of 9-items (Bakker *et al.*, 2008). Both scales measure the three dimensions of work engagement: vigor, dedication and absorption. These two scales have demonstrated a good internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006). In addition, Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) advised that the total score for work engagement can be used in empirical research since there is a moderate to high correlations between the dimensions. Besides that, Schaufeli *et al.* (2006) claimed that UWES scale have been

shown to have acceptable psychometric properties and can be used in studies on positive organizational behavior.

In this discussion, the most appropriate theory would be the Conservation of Resource theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 2002). The COR theory contends that there are four types of resources which are objects, personal characteristics, conditions and energies (Hobfoll, 2002). Specifically, COR theory suggests that individuals seek to acquire, maintain and preserve certain resources. Therefore, it is expected that employees are more sensitive to stressors in the work place because they perceived stressors will threaten their resources. Besides that, COR theory also suggests that people tends to invest in the resources to protect against resource loss, recover from losses and to gain resources (Hobfoll, 2001). This suggests that individuals with greater resources are less inclined to resource loss and are more capable of managing resource gain. Scholars argued that based on the COR theory, the presence of resources that an individual obtained would result in resource gain which ultimately increases work engagement (Llorens *et al.*, 2007; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007).

Antecedents of work engagement: A review of the extant literature revealed that the antecedents to work engagement have been empirically examined in several studies (Karatepe and Olugbade, 2009). Generally, these antecedents can be categorized as job resources (e.g., job characteristics, job control, social support and performance feedback); organizational resources (e.g., training, autonomy, technology) and work life experiences (e.g., reward and recognition, value-fit) as well as personal resources (e.g., optimism, self-efficacy, resilience) (Abdul Hamid and Yahya, 2011; Koyuncu *et al.*, 2006; Salanova *et al.*, 2005; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007). Resources have been defined as environmental and individual factors that support the person in coping successfully with job demands, attaining goals and achieving personal growth and development (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001). Results from past studies provided evidence that resources have a motivational potential in stimulating work engagement since resources could (1) reduce the job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; (2) be functional in achieving work goals and (3) stimulate personal growths, learning and development (Bakker *et al.*, 2008).

Kahn (1990) contended that engagement varies among individuals according to the availability of resources that people perceived themselves to have. According to Hobfoll *et al.* (2003), personal resources are aspects of the self that are generally associated with individual resiliency and ability to control and impact upon their environment successfully. In particular, Liu *et al.* (2008) argued that emotional resources is a subtype of personal resources that assist individuals in achieving their job goals and reduce their psychological cost in attaining the job goals. Additionally, Collins (1981) asserted that emotional resources can be accumulated resource from successfully social interactions with others. Collins (1981) further explained that the accumulated emotional resources will serve to further generate positive emotions in the next interactions. In this light, Liu *et al.* (2008) proposed that emotional intelligence can be used as a proxy to indicate individual's general level of emotional resources. Empirically, Schutte *et al.* (2001) has tested the link between emotional intelligence and successful social interactions. In their study, it was reported that respondents with higher emotional intelligence scores possessed higher score in social skills. Schutte *et al.* (2001) explained that because respondents with high emotional resources are more aware of their own emotions; know how to regulate them; aware of others' emotions and able to respond effectively to others' emotional needs, therefore, they are likely to have a better social skills in work.

Emotional intelligence: To date, scholars are still debating whether emotional intelligence constitutes an individual's characteristics or ability (Carmeli and Josman, 2006). Based on the findings from previous study, Schutte *et al.* (2002) concluded that emotional intelligence can be conceptualized as either ability (Ciarrochi *et al.*, 2000) or a personality trait (Schutte *et al.*, 1998). Following Mayer and Salovey (1997), defined emotional intelligence as "the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thoughts, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth." In particular, emotional intelligence is conceptualized as a set of interrelated skill concerning the ability of hotel customer-contact employees to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotions; the ability to access and generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth.

Hotels are labor intensive industry (O'Fallon and Rutherford, 2010). In the context of hotels, emotional intelligence among customer-contact employees is profound. This is because customer-contact employees in hotels have a very high frequency of interactions with their colleagues and the customers. Firstly, the customer-contact employees need to attend to customers' requests with the presence of customers. Secondly, they have to receive instructions from their supervisor to execute their job. Thirdly, customer-contact employees need to coordinate closely with their colleagues in delivering service to the customers (Jung and Yoon, 2011). This implies that, in executing their daily routine, customer-contact employees need to be in an emotionally healthy condition in order to generate positive outcomes in their service encounter. In fact, Carmeli and Josman (2006) has ascertained that emotion intelligence is an important resources that underline human behavior during interactions. In this regards, past studies have shown support on the relationship between emotional intelligence and various work outcomes such as job behaviors job performance, OCBs and counterproductive behaviors (Carmeli and Josman, 2006; Jung and Yoon, 2011; Korkmaz and Arpacl, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2011; Wong and Law, 2002). For example, in the survey conducted by Jung and Yoon (2011) among the employees in Seoul's five star hotels suggested that emotional intelligence has a significant positive effect on OCBs and negatively effect on counterproductive behaviors. In addition, it was also reported that emotional intelligence were associated with positive working attitudes such as job satisfaction (Kafetsios and Zampetakis, 2008; Wong and Law, 2002), customer orientation (Pettijohn *et al.*, 2010) and psychological well-being such as self-esteem, life satisfaction and self-acceptance (Carmeli *et al.*, 2009).

As mentioned above, Collins (1981) opined that emotional resources can be accumulated from successfully social interactions with others. Given the fact that customer-contact employees with emotional intelligence would have a successful interaction with their colleagues and their customers, therefore, they are likely to accumulate more emotional resources from their daily interactions. Borrowing from the lens of COR theory, the presence of resources that an individual obtained would result in resource gain. The resource gained from their daily interaction will in turn motivate the customer-contact employees to invest more effort in their work. Subsequently, they are likely to experience high levels of energy and mental resilience in works, more persistence, have higher sense of significance in their work, more enthusiasm and inspired. Apart from that, the resources gained may make them happier and more deeply engrossed in their work. In short, they tend to have more vigor, dedicate and absorption in their daily work. Therefore, it is expected that emotional intelligence will directly and positively influence the work engagement of customer-contact employees. Hence, proposition 1 is presented as follows:

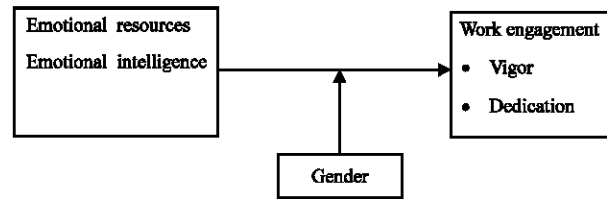


Fig. 1: Proposed conceptual framework

- **Proposition 1:** Emotional intelligence of the customer-contact employees will be positively related to their work engagement

The role of gender as a moderator in the emotional intelligence-work engagement relationships: Myriad of study in the past have evidenced that male and female employees are difference in term of their work values and work attitudes (Kafetsios and Zampetakis, 2008; Komter, 1990; Martin and Kirkcaldy, 1998; Rosenblatt *et al.*, 1998). For instance, Rosenblatt *et al.* (1998) found that women placed greater value to interpersonal relationships, work circumstances, attractive work hours, interesting work and a match between person and job. On the other hand, a study by Martin and Kirkcaldy (1998) on work attitudes indicated female students are more intrinsically motivated as compared to male students. Similarly, Komter (1990) suggested that female employees are more devoted towards their jobs and less easily separated from their work. Specifically, Kafetsios and Zampetakis (2008) noted that there is a difference among genders in the relationship between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction. In this vein, it is plausible to expect that gender may moderate the relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement. Given the fact that female customer-contact employees are more intrinsically motivated, more devoted towards their jobs and less easily separated from their work, therefore, it can be postulated that female employees are more vigor, dedicated and aborted in their job as opposed to male colleagues. Hence, it can be expected that the positive relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement will be moderated as follows:

- **Proposition 2:** The relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement is stronger for female customer-contact employees than male customer-contact employees

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the above mentioned arguments and in relation to the COR theory, a conceptual framework is constructed, as depicted in Fig. 1. Emotional intelligence is assumed to predict work engagement while gender will moderate the relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement.

CONCLUSION

The ability of hotels to develop customer satisfaction plays an important role in determining their success. One feasible way for hotels to remain competitive is to enhance their service quality. In delivering service quality, hotels need to ensure that their customer-contact employees possess positive work attitude such as work engagement. Since hotels are labor-intensive, employees especially customer-contact personnel play a critical role in ensuring high quality service delivery. When such employees are engage in their work, they are bound to exhibit excellent service

behavior. A review of past literature has supported the significant relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement. Hence, a conceptual model has been proposed where emotional intelligence has been postulated as predictors of work engagement. In addition, given the fact that gender are differ in terms of their work values and working attitude, gender has been posited to have a moderating effect on the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable.

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