The key drivers of employee engagement in private higher education institutions in Malaysia during COVID-19

Shet Vui Chu¹
🔟 **Walton Wider²⁺**
🔟 **Ling Shing Wong³**
🔟 **Choon Kit Chan⁴**
🔟 **Siti Sarah Maidin⁵**
🔟 **Nurul Aliah Mustafa⁶**

¹*Heriot-Watt University, Putrajaya, Malaysia.*
Email: shetvui@hotmail.com
²*Faculty of Business and Communications, INTI International University, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.*
Email: walton.wider@newinti.ed.my
³*Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, INTI International University, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.*
Email: lingshing.wong@newinti.edu.my
⁴*Mechanical Engineering Department, Faculty of Engineering and Quantity Surveying, INTI International University, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.*
Email: choonkit.chan@newinti.edu.my
⁵*Faculty of Data Science and Information Technology, INTI International University, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.*
Email: sitisarah.maidin@newinti.edu.my
⁶*University College of MAIWP International, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.*
Email: draliah@ucmi.edu.my

(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

Online teaching has become an inevitable trend in education to enhance employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes in the workplace have disrupted employee experiences and caused psychological distress. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between key drivers of employee engagement during COVID-19. The AON Hewitt Employee Engagement Model was adapted. Three main factors rewards and recognition, workplace culture and leadership were identified to further investigate the phenomenon. The design of the study was cross-sectional and the research instruments were adapted from a number of prior studies. A total of 132 online questionnaires were filled out by Malaysian employees of private institutions of higher education. Research hypotheses were evaluated using SPSS version 26.0. All key drivers were found to have a positive and statistically significant effect on employee engagement. The findings of this study are intended to provide insights into the key drivers that influence employee engagement. This study sheds light on how to incorporate business strategies aimed at improving employee engagement and organizational performance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contribution/Originality: This study examines the influence of rewards, workplace culture and leadership on employee engagement in Malaysian private higher education during the COVID-19 crisis. It highlights the critical role of rewards and recognition, offering strategic insights for human resource practitioners in challenging circumstances.

1. INTRODUCTION

The workplace faces numerous obstacles to managing employee engagement as a result of the changes brought about by COVID-19 (Pass & Ridgway, 2022). Employee expectations are shifting as a result of COVID-19, the lockdown and social distancing as well as the safety precautions implemented which have had a significant impact

on the labour force. Psychological pressure and uncertainty had a negative impact on employees (Rubeena & Naz, 2021). Employers realise that it is difficult to return to "normal" and that there may be an increase in concerns regarding personal emotions and physical and mental safety (Surma, Nunes, Rook, & Loder, 2021). According to De-La-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021), a comprehensive understanding of the main factors influencing employee engagement seems to be lacking. It is unclear how the role of human resource development should adapt to the work. The goal is to enable employees to become adaptive and agile in any situation particularly during any stage of a crisis. Moreover, identifying the most effective engagement strategies that employers can utilize in such situations also remains a challenge. According to SHRM's research (2020), 41% of employees feel burned out, drained or exhausted as a result of their work during COVID-19. The COVID-19 has impacted the work pattern of the labour force, the workplace, employee experiences and psychological distress. According to the meta-analysis by Gallup (2020), the company with the highest employee engagement had 23% higher profitability, 18% higher sales productivity and 81% lower absenteeism. Employers must find new ways to connect, recognise and support employees during this challenging time (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). As a result of their shifting behaviours, it is crucial to comprehend the needs and expectations of employees in order to increase employee engagement.

It is essential for Malaysia's private higher education institutions to understand the main factors that influence employee engagement (Arokiasamy & Tat, 2020). Colleges and universities adopt preventive measures in order to protect their staff and reduce financial risk during COVID-19. Many studies have shown that rewards and recognition have a positive relationship with employee engagement and are crucial for organizations to achieve their objectives, boost productivity and retain talent (Baqir, Hussain, Waseem, & Islam, 2020; Chioma, 2021; Ewool, Azinga, & Kamil, 2021; Mesepy, 2016). Private higher education institutions in Malaysia are compelled to implement cost-cutting measures such as layoffs, salary reductions, the continuation of a pay freeze etc. in order to survive during COVID-19 (Babulal & Solhi, 2020). Organizations redesign their human resource practises to increase employee engagement after COVID-19 (Luthia & Sathiamoorthy, 2021).

Additionally, COVID-19 has posed significant challenges to education due to the abrupt shift to online instruction (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Business leaders and human resource professionals in charge of private higher education institutions must recognise the need for cultural transformation in order to maintain a sustainable organisational value that shapes workplace culture and steer positive culture shifts during the COVID-19 pandemic (Al Omari & Al'Abri, 2021). According to 75% of working Americans, 94% of managers agree that a healthy workplace culture fosters the development of resilient team members (SHRM, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis has created a difficult environment particularly in terms of human resource management (Hamouche, 2021). Due to the unpredictability of the labour force, dealing with labour issues is more difficult than it was before the pandemic (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Leaders were expected to demonstrate a high level of leadership by guiding employees towards achieving an organization's objective during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employee engagement impacts a company's culture, productivity and the workplace within which employees interact.

Consequently, the purpose of this study is to answer the research question, what are the key drivers of employee engagement in Malaysia's private higher education institutions? Identifying the key drivers is essential because there is still insufficient empirical data on management's involvement in enhancing employee job engagement during COVID-19 (Darwish, Ahmed, & Pahi, 2020). The findings of the study are intended to be used by academia, government and the human resource industry to build and create an academic and institutional excellence-supportive environment in higher education.

1.1. Underlying Theory

An employee engagement model describes the framework for ensuring that people are content, empowered and productive in their jobs. Each approach relies on organisational psychology to help businesses create employee engagement strategies (Vandana & Murthy, 2021). The ultimate goal of employee engagement is to make sure

that organizations are better equipped to take action to maintain an adaptable and dedicated workforce (Chiwawa & Wissink, 2021; Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2018). The current research framework was constructed using the AON Hewitt Employee Engagement Model as its theoretical foundation.

Engagement can be characterized as the zeal, enthusiasm and intense commitment that employees harbor towards their employer. It is the emotional and intellectual commitment of individuals to an organisation (Baumark, 2004). The Aon Hewitt Employee Engagement Model is comprised of six engagement factors that are classified as foundations and differentiators. The foundational engagement factors include the basics, company practices and work which are fundamental and critical factors that can have a significant impact on an organization's ability to engage its employees. Benefits, job security, safety, the working environment and a healthy work-life balance are fundamental requirements for hiring employees. Company practices include communication, staffing, customer-centricity, infrastructure and inclusivity to support employees. Collaboration and empowerment must also be designed to promote engagement. The differentiating engagement factors include brand, leadership and performance. These factors distinguish a company from its competitors and enable it to become a place where employees are proud to work. The brand consists of the company's reputation, employee value proposition and corporate social responsibility to increase employee engagement. Two essential components of an organization leadership are its senior and business unit leaders. The final motivator is performance. Career opportunities, rewards and recognition systems, learning and development programmes, performance management and people management will substantially increase employee engagement.

It is the responsibility of leaders to serve as role models, foster an inclusive workplace culture, communicate effectively be supportive and maintain high levels of motivation through rewards and recognition (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). Consequently, the researcher identifies two fundamental engagement drivers: rewards and recognition which are components of the performance driver and workplace culture. According to the researcher, these two factors may impact an organization's ability to engage its employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, leadership would assist the organisation in differentiating itself from its competitors and evolving into a place where employees are happy and willing to work. These variables will influence the engagement outcomes and the business will strive to perform at its highest level to contribute to its expansion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Rewards, Recognition and Employee Engagement

Rewards and recognition programmes are effective ways to increase employee engagement (Baqir et al., 2020). The rewards that are given to workers can be split into two categories: intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsic rewards are effective forms of compensation offered to employees, primarily in the form of pay, bonus, benefits, promotions and allowances. On the other hand, intrinsic rewards are those that come with the profession, such as recognition, responsibility, career advancement and learning opportunities. Reward and recognition are broad concepts that need to be progressively re-defined to cover traditional methods of thanking and rewarding employees in order to instill in them a greater sense of significance (Ngwa, Adeleke, Agbaeze, Ghasi, & Imhanrenialena, 2019). A positive relationship between employers and employees can be fostered by rewards and recognition programmes. In Pakistan's higher education institutions, employee engagement helps to cultivate a spirit of cooperation and sparks high levels of performance (Khalid & Aftab, 2017). According to Azmy (2019), salary is an important factor in fostering employee engagement in higher education institutions. Employee engagement will increase if they feel obliged to respond after receiving rewards and recognition from their employers (Altehrebah, Yusr, & Salimon, 2019). A fair bonus payout system and transparent promotion policies all contribute to employee engagement. On the other hand, Chioma (2021) found that reward systems have a significant and positive relationship with all employee engagement measures such as physical engagement, cognitive engagement and emotional engagement. However, Manjaree and Perera (2021) reported that rewards and recognition are of the lowest priority during

COVID-19 and technological readiness is the most important factor in determining employee engagement. Nevertheless, the use of rewards and recognition as motivating tools for employees leads to higher levels of engagement which in turn helps to increase employee retention and create a more positive working environment. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H_1: *Rewards and recognition have a positive effect on employee engagement.*

2.2. Workplace Culture and Employee Engagement

Workplace culture can be described as "the structures and procedures that guide employee behavior within an organization as well as how employees perceive and evaluate their working environment" (Chiwawa & Wissink, 2021). Enhancements or reinforcements in workplace culture can lead to increased employee engagement. A company with a positive and healthy culture fosters employee engagement and motivation. Nurcholis and Budi (2020) found a strong relationship between company culture and employee engagement. According to the findings of a study conducted at the University of Negros Occidental-Recoletos in the Philippines by Manalo and Manalo (2019), the culture of the workplace has the strongest relationship with employee engagement while rewards and recognition play the least significant role. Highly motivated employees have a robust and positive culture. On the other hand, working for a company with a poor culture may demotivate an individual from performing well (Babu, Mohan, & Manivannan, 2020; Nurcholis & Budi, 2020; Pepra-Mensah & Kyeremeh, 2018). Therefore, we hypothesise that:

H_2: *Workplace culture has a positive effect on employee engagement.*

2.3. Leadership and Employee Engagement

According to McCarthy, Moonesinghe, and Dean (2020), a leader is someone who can boost productivity, influence organizational culture, inspire and motivate staff and act with integrity. These qualities contribute to higher employee engagement and satisfaction. Hasibuan, Akbar, and Suyatno (2018) emphasized the importance of effective leadership in guiding employees to increase their productivity when completing tasks. In Azmy's (2019) research, leadership was identified as crucial for achieving success and help employees understand the significance of achieving organizational goals. According to Manjaree and Perera (2021), there is a positive relationship between leadership and high levels of employee engagement. Their research revealed that a leader's vision, beliefs and values are crucial, with an emphasis on adapting to changing conditions. The ability of leaders to apply the most effective leadership techniques will positively impact employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Bulińska-Stangrecka and Bagieńska (2021), leaders are essential in fostering interpersonal trust among coworkers and managers. Consequently, we hypothesize:

H_3: *Leadership has a positive effect on employee engagement.*

The following conceptual framework was built based on a literature review and the underlying theory (see Figure 1).
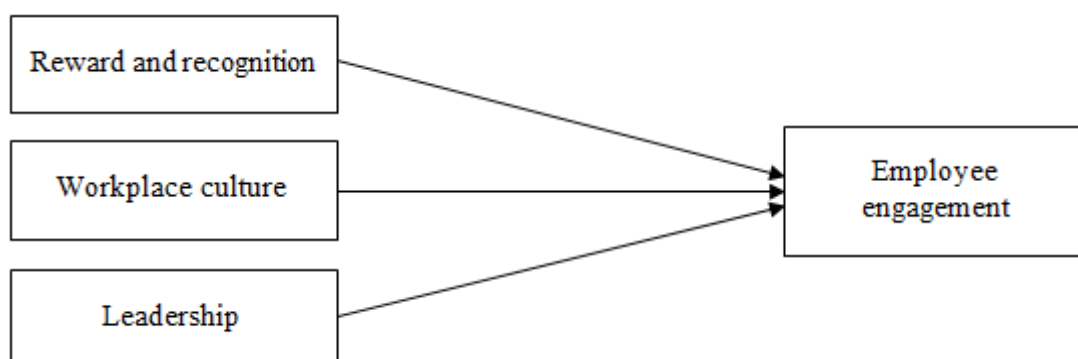

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

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3. METHODS

3.1. Samples

The present research focused on employees of a private higher education institution located in Malaysia. The adequacy of the sample size in this study was determined through G-Power analysis. The calculation was based on a statistical power of 0.95, a significance level (α) of 0.05 and an effect size of 0.15. The minimum sample size required to meet these criteria was found to be 119. The research used a snowball sampling technique for data collection. The survey instrument was distributed electronically through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and LinkedIn, using a hyperlink generated from a Google Form. The initial participant who met the specified eligibility criteria was chosen to participate in the survey. Subsequently, these participants were asked to suggest additional individuals from the sample whom they considered suitable for inclusion as survey respondents. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N=162).

Demographic	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	58	35.8
	Female	104	64.2
Age	18-20 years old	3	1.9
	21-30 years old	52	32.1
	31-40 years old	66	40.7
	41-50 years old	38	23.5
	51 years and above	3	1.9
Education qualification	SPM or STPM	5	3.1
	Diploma	13	8.0
	Bachelor's degree	88	54.3
	Master's degree	54	33.3
	PhD	2	1.2
Job position	Clerk	3	1.9
	Officer	7	4.3
	Executive	46	28.4
	Senior executive	30	18.5
	Assistant manager	16	9.9
	Manager	28	17.3
	Senior manager	19	11.7
	Other	13	8.0

The smallest proportion was identified as male (35.8%, n = 58) while the larger portion was identified as female (64.2%, n = 104) in the gender distribution. When considering age groups, the largest portion of respondents fell within the 31–40 years old category (40.7%, n=66) followed by the 21–30 years old group (32.1%, n=52), 41–50 years old group (23.5%, n=38), 8–20 years old category (1.9%, n=3) and finally 51 years old and above (1.9%, n=3). From an educational perspective, most respondents possessed a bachelor's degree (54.3%, n=88) followed by those holding a master's degree (33.3%, n=54), a diploma (8.0%, n=13), Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia/Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (SPM/STPM) (3.1%, n=5) and a smaller fraction were Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) holders (1.2%, n=2). Most people who participated in the study were executives (28.4%, n=46) followed by senior executives (18.5%, n=30), managers (17.3%, n=28), senior managers (11.7%, n=19), assistant managers (9.9%, n=16), employees in other positions (8.0%, n=13), officers (4.3%, n=7) and clerks (1.9%, n=3).

3.2. Measures

This study uses a questionnaire to collect data from employees of private higher education institutions. The final form has 5 sections adopted from Soliman and Wahba (2019). The first four sections include 5 items for employee engagement, 5 items for rewards and recognition, 5 items for workplace culture and 5 items for leadership. The last sections are demographic variables which include gender, age, educational level and job

position. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale of 1-5 (strongly disagree - strongly agree). The Cronbach alpha ranges from 0.784 to 0.925.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 27.0. We carried out multiple layers of analysis to meet the objectives of the study. A preliminary descriptive analysis was performed to determine the frequency distribution of the respondents' backgrounds and the variables under investigation. Pearson's correlation coefficient was then employed to explore the relationships between rewards and recognition, workplace culture, leadership and employee engagement. Lastly, the researcher applied multiple regression analysis to identify the distinct predictors of employee engagement. All statistical tests were based on a significance threshold of 0.05.

4. RESULTS

Table 2 displays the results of the Pearson correlation between rewards and recognition, workplace culture, leadership and employee engagement. Rewards and recognition were found to be positively associated with employee engagement ($r = 0.598$, $p < 0.001$). The relationship between workplace culture and employee engagement is also highly significant ($r = 0.617$, $p < 0.001$). Employees who perceive a positive workplace culture typically report greater levels of engagement. Leadership and employee engagement were found to be significantly associated ($r = 0.605$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and relationships among variables (N = 132).

No.	Variables	Mean	Standard deviation (SD)	1	2	3	4
1.	Employee engagement	3.97	0.486	1			
2.	Rewards and recognition	3.72	0.497	0.598**	1		
3.	Workplace culture	3.60	0.691	0.617**	0.572**	1	
4.	Leadership	3.63	0.731	0.605**	0.532**	0.624**	1

Note: **$p < 0.001$.

Table 3 displays the results of the multiple regression analysis examining the predictors of employee engagement. 51.3% of the variance in employee satisfaction was found to be significantly explained by the combination of rewards and recognition, workplace culture, leadership and employee engagement. The strongest predictor of employee engagement was rewards and recognition (beta = 0.292, $p < 0.01$) followed by workplace culture (beta = 0.277, $p < 0.01$) and leadership (beta = 0.276, $p < 0.01$). Hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 are thus supported.

Table 3. Predictors of job satisfaction (n = 162).

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	F	R²	Degrees of freedom (Df)	Beta	T-value	P-value
Employee engagement	Rewards and recognition	44.965**	0.513	-3,128	0.292	3.742	0.00
	workplace culture				0.277	3.276	0.00
	Leadership				0.276	3.369	0.00

Note: **$p < 0.001$.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aims to determine the impact of rewards and recognition, workplace culture and leadership on employee engagement in Malaysian private higher education institutions. The results indicate that all three

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independent variables had a positive effect on employee engagement during COVID-19 in Malaysian private higher education institutions.

This study's findings indicate that rewards and recognition are the most important predictors of employee engagement in private higher education in Malaysia thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. Our results support those of earlier research by Alzyoud (2018), Liu, Yu, Guo, and Li (2022), and Elsafty and Ragheb (2020). When an organization provides socio-emotional resources to its employees, those employees are bound to respond with reciprocal engagement. When the organization neglects adequate compensation, employees are more inclined to disengage (Kwon & Kim, 2020). Economic uncertainty during COVID-19 and the ongoing financial crisis have significantly influenced people's lives and financial situations (Fei, Sabri, Mohamed, Wijekoon, & Majid, 2020). It is recommended that policymakers, institutional management or Human Resource (HR) practitioners re-assess the elements of rewards and recognition which include performance-based compensation, fringe benefits and talent recognition as a means of adapting to a new normal for driving employee engagement in maintaining workplace productivity. Wages play a role in the attraction and retention of employees (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2018). In addition, a performance-based pay system may be used in an organization to boost productivity and provide salaries that are competitive with the market as well as additional allowances. It acts as a motivational factor in which employees' compensation is based on their achievement of specific goals which has an indirect influence on the performance of an individual. According to Ogbonnaya, Daniels, and Nielsen (2017), it is asserted that performance-related pay has a direct positive relationship with employee commitment. Yu, Park, and Hyun (2021) demonstrated that the attributes of pandemic concerns had a significant effect on work stress. Educational assistance, lodging, meal subsidy, medical coverage, etc. organizations may consider providing unique fringe benefits such as comprehensive health insurance, mental health support or counseling, flexible work arrangement, childcare assistance, etc. to enhance employees' physical and psychological wellbeing. According to Van Der Westhuizen (2017), fringe benefits are kinds of indirect compensation offered to employees to attract, retain and motivate them to stay with the company. Compensation, benefits and wellbeing may not be enough to keep employees motivated towards excellence in performance and loyalty. As a result, one of the employees' recognition tactics might be talent development. Career development increases employee motivation by affording them opportunities to advance professionally within the organization (Baharin & Hanafi, 2018).

The study's second hypothesis proposes that organizational culture has a positive influence on employee engagement. This outcome supports the findings of studies by Babu et al. (2020), Manalo and Manalo (2019) and Nurcholis and Budi (2020) which align with previous studies. Additionally, the study's concluding insight, corresponding to hypothesis 3, underscores the significant role of leadership in fostering employee engagement in the context of Malaysian private higher education. This observation aligns with the conclusions drawn in the studies by Manjaree and Perera (2021), McCarthy et al. (2020), and El Toufaili (2018). Many organizations have impacted the workplace culture and must adjust their approaches to managing their employees and customers (Mustajab et al., 2020). Organizations with a positive culture foster strong relationships among employees, share common values and offer a comfortable, healthy environment where employees may develop, grow and perform to their best ability (Mushtaque & Siddiqui, 2019). There have been significant shifts in how employees experience their own cultures and adhere to the new rules and regulations brought about by the pandemic (Wiedemann, 2020). An efficient culture motivates individuals to perform their work with vigor and energy to achieve optimal results (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020). Additionally, leaders need to establish an environment in which employees have the opportunity to engage in creative activities to achieve their goals (El Toufaili, 2018). Leaders may look into diversity, equity and inclusion efforts to create a healthy and pleasant culture in the workplace (Baum, 2021).

6. LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

Employees who are enthusiastic about their work produce better outcomes for the organisation and for themselves (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017). The purpose of the findings is to provide the relevant authority, such as the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), with a deeper understanding of the needs of employees at private higher education institutions in Malaysia serve as a reference for the ministry to plan its development strategies. These strategies contribute to the development of competent, inventive and virtuous individuals in order to achieve national goals. This study may also help human resource practitioners in private higher education institutions in Malaysia gain a deeper understanding of the impact of employee engagement and develop a more effective strategy to enhance human capital management which aims to improve employee retention, increase productivity and foster better employee relationships.

This study has several limitations that must be taken into consideration. All preliminary data collection in Malaysia must be performed online due to the Movement Control Order. Future researchers may extend the survey period by combining a quantitative survey with a qualitative survey, such as through interviews, focus groups, observation, etc. Qualitative research is more targeted allowing researchers to take a significantly more theoretical approach to selecting issues for further study. The researcher may expand the data collection to include both Malaysian public and private higher education institutions. Therefore, a more in-depth study that provides a more comprehensive picture of employee engagement in Malaysia's entire higher education sector could be more beneficial for policymakers. By comparing the data from different perspectives, policymakers can more effectively address the challenges.

Next, the researcher may enhance the research framework by incorporating more independent variables that may promote employee engagement in Malaysian private higher education institutions. It is recommended to include additional variables in the Aon Hewitt employee engagement model in order to produce more comprehensive and significant results. The Aon Hewitt model is comprised of six key drivers that shape the organization experience. Engaged employees can be described as those who 'advocate, commit and excel'. They speak highly of the organization, show loyalty by staying with it and tirelessly aim for excellence in their roles and for the organization as a whole. Ultimately, such behavior contributes to the company's specific outcomes such as increased productivity, improved customer satisfaction and growth in sales (Hinzmann, Rašticová, & Šácha, 2019).

Lastly, rewards and recognition have the greatest impact on employee engagement. This could be helpful for human resource professionals and organisation management in developing a more effective employee engagement strategy to increase long-term productivity and employee retention.

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