

Leadership Style and Its Impact on Employee Engagement among SMEs in Malaysia: The Mediating Role of Work-Life Balance

Sudhashini Nair*, Ilangovan Perumal, Mehrunishah Begum Bathusha Hamid

Faculty of Business, Accounting, and Law, SEGi University, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

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Abstract:

Employee engagement has been frequently studied since its emergence in the 1990s. To ensure that employees are mentally and emotionally connected to their work and organization, leadership style and work-life balance are key variables that may enhance employee engagement, especially among SMEs that make up almost 90% of the Malaysian economy. A leader who is concerned about their employee's wellbeing will promote work-life balance and employee engagement. Hence, the goal of this study was to examine the possible relationships between leadership style, work-life balance, and employee engagement and the possible mediating effect of work-life balance in the relationship between leadership style and employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs. Furthermore, the aim of the study was to contribute to existing knowledge on leadership style, work-life balance, and employee engagement among employees in SMEs due to the limited studies available in Malaysia, and to propose policies that should be implemented to enhance both work-life balance and employee engagement. The research methodology employed in this study was a deductive approach. The study was an explanatory mono-method quantitative design using questionnaires distributed online. The research strategy applied was the survey method using a cross-sectional study. 150 respondents answered the online questionnaire. Data analysis was performed using the SPSS software to test the reliability of the data, conducting linearity, correlation, and multiple regression tests to examine the relationships between the independent variables and dependent variables. The mediation test was conducted using the Sobel test. The results of the study revealed that leadership style had a significant positive relationship with work-life balance and employee engagement, whereas work-life balance had a positive relationship with employee engagement. Finally, work-life balance partially mediated the relationship between leadership style and employee engagement. The scientific novelty of the study was the test results, which indicate that employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs is affected by leadership style and work-life balance. This study provides the implications of the research findings.

Keywords: employee engagement, work-life balance, leadership style.

马来西亚中小企业的领导风格及其对员工敬业度的影响：工作与生活平

Corresponding Author: Sudhashini Nair, Faculty of Business, Accounting, and Law, SEGi University, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia; email: sudhashini@segi.edu.my

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衡的中介作用

摘要:

自 20 世纪 90 年代出现以来, 员工敬业度一直受到频繁的研究。为了确保员工在精神和情感上与其工作和组织保持联系, 领导风格和工作与生活的平衡是可以提高员工敬业度的关键变量, 特别是在占马来西亚经济近 90% 的中小企业中。关心员工福祉的领导者将促进工作与生活的平衡和员工敬业度。因此, 本研究的目的是探讨马来西亚中小型企业的领导风格、工作与生活平衡和员工敬业度之间可能存在的关系, 以及工作与生活平衡在领导风格与员工敬业度之间关系中可能的中介作用。此外, 由于马来西亚的研究有限, 该研究的目的是为中小企业员工的领导风格、工作与生活平衡和员工敬业度方面的现有知识做出贡献, 并提出应实施的政策, 以加强这两项工作—生活平衡和员工敬业度。本研究采用的研究方法是演绎法。该研究是一项解释性单一方法定量设计, 使用在线分发的问卷。采用的研究策略是采用横断面研究的调查方法。150 名受访者回答了在线调查问卷。采用统计软件软件进行数据分析, 检验数据的可靠性, 进行线性、相关性和多元回归检验, 考察自变量和因变量之间的关系。中介检验采用索贝尔检验进行。研究结果显示, 领导风格与工作与生活平衡和员工敬业度呈显着正相关, 而工作与生活平衡与员工敬业度呈正相关。最后, 工作与生活的平衡部分调节了领导风格和员工敬业度之间的关系。该研究的科学新颖之处在于测试结果, 该结果表明马来西亚中小企业的员工敬业度受到领导风格和工作与生活平衡的影响。本研究提供了研究结果的含义。

关键词: 员工敬业度、工作与生活平衡、领导风格。

1. Introduction

Employee engagement refers to the emotional commitment employees must the organization in achieving organizational goals (Kruse, 2021). Such employees generally exhibit enthusiasm, dedication to their work, motivation, and passion. However, a disengaged employee, on the other hand, exhibits lack of interest and motivation in their job, and although they may get the job done, they may not put the extra effort toward achieving organizational goals (Parson, 2022). An engaged employee would increase productivity and morale at the workplace and provide better customer service (Jouany & Mäkipää, 2023). Furthermore, the literature has stated that an organization with high employee engagement will achieve higher productivity, sales, profit, and earnings per share (EPS) and has a quicker recovery speed after financial outbreaks. Hence, employee engagement is one of the key ingredients to an organization's success. In a recent report on the State of the Global Workplace in 2023 by Gallup (2023), it was found that 23 % of employees are engaged at work, the highest figure since 2009. However, in the United States of America (USA), employee engagement in 2023 decreased to 31 % from 36 % in 2020. Disengagement among employees, however, increased by 2 % to 17% from 2020. Harter (2023) stated that the regions with the highest levels of employee engagement are South Asia (33%), the United States and Canada (31%), and Latin America and the Caribbean (31%). In 2020, the Employee Experience Trends Malaysia Report by Qualtrics found that Malaysia ranked seventh in employee engagement among Asian nations, after India, Thailand, and Hong Kong (Qualtrics, 2020).

According to Jian et al. (2020), employee engagement activities in Malaysia are of major concern, with only 11 % of employees showing involvement, 8 % showing no involvement, and the remaining 81 % showing less involvement (Jian et al., 2020). There are 1.15 million SMEs nationwide, and SMEs make up more than 97 % of the total number of business establishments in Malaysia, employing close to 70 % of the country's workforce and delivering 38.2 % of GDP (Lim, 2023). Therefore, employee engagement is important for the sustainability of SMEs in Malaysia.

Employees in Malaysia believe that leadership style has the possibility of improving employee engagement as a leader who shows empathy and compassion would enhance employee engagement at work (Santhiram, 2021). Leaders in Malaysian SMEs must be ready to show compassion and empathy when dealing with employees who are facing issues. This is because such displays may enhance employee engagement in the workplace since workplace empathy invites more loyalty, dedication, and employee engagement (Santhiram, 2021). Hence, leadership style may affect employee engagement. Furthermore, leadership style in Malaysian SMEs may affect work-life balance because Malaysians want a leadership style that supports work-support work-life balance because leaders set the tone for the workplace, and leaders significantly impact the culture of work-life balance through their actions and decisions (Jayasingam, 2021; Sidhu, 2022).

A recent survey by the UCSI Poll Research Centre found that a significant proportion of Malaysian employees find themselves working beyond their prescribed hours of duty. Only 4 out of 10 Malaysians were happy with their work-life balance as they worked

beyond the prescribed working hours, with many working more than 10 hours a day (Bunyan, 2023). Chan (2023) stated that Malaysian employees want autonomy in shaping a work–life routine that works best for them, and flexible work options can help them realize that vision. Randstad Malaysia’s country director said that enforcing an all-office work arrangement can lead to resistance and disengagement among employees, especially if they are able to prove higher productivity when working remotely (Chan 2023). Hence, work-life balance may affect employee engagement.

Hence, the aim of this research is to study the possible relationships that may exist between leadership style, work-life balance, and employee engagement, with the possibility that work-life balance may mediate the relationship between leadership style and employee engagement among employees in Malaysian SMEs. The results of this research would contribute to existing knowledge, especially since there are still scarce publications available in this area. In addition, this study would create awareness and promote the creation of appropriate policies necessary to enhance employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Relationship between Leadership Style and Employee Engagement

Leadership refers to the process of directing and influencing the task-related activities of an organization (Balbuena et al., 2020). Leadership style refers to the patterns, behaviors, assumptions, attitudes, or traits exhibited by the leader to provide direction to or influence his followers in order to achieve a certain task or goal (Balbuena et al., 2020; Zorn & Violanti, 1993). Employee engagement, according to Schaufeli et al. (2002), is defined as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p. 74). Katili et al.’s (2021) study on 204 employees who worked in the steel industry, which is located in Banten Province of Indonesia, found that leadership style had a significant positive effect on employee engagement. Muddle (2020) found that leadership style influenced the engagement of 84 health employees from three hospitals in Papua New Guinea. The author found that transformational and transactional leadership have a positive relationship with employee engagement. Finally, Ashfaq et al.’s (2021) study on 245 respondents from private and public sector organizations in Pakistan found that leadership styles such as ethical leadership had a significant relationship with employee engagement. Hence, from this literature review, we propose the following:

H1: A significant positive relationship exists between leadership style and employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs.

2.2. Relationship between Leadership Style and Work-

Life Balance

Work-life balance has been defined by Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) as the “accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his/her role-related partners in the work and family domains” (p. 66). Leadership style has been recognized as a significant predictor of work-life balance (Adisa, 2019). Wang et al.’s (2017) study on individuals working in 22 industrial sectors operating in Greece found that leadership styles such as servant leadership improve work–life balance through identification with the leader and work-to-family positive spillover. The study by Berger et al. (2017) involving employees from Mexico, the Philippines, and the USA on leadership style and work-life balance found that when transactional leadership increases, it reduces negative work-home and home-work interaction in all participating countries; however, when transformational leadership increases, this effect is even more. Finally, in Indonesia, Hayati’s (2022) study found that among 107 bank employees in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia, transformational leadership enhanced work-life balance. Hence, from this literature review, we propose the following:

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between leadership style and work-life balance in Malaysian SMEs.

2.3. Relationship between Work-Life Balance and Employee Engagement

Studies have shown that work-life balance has an effect on employee engagement. In fact, according to the study by Larasati et al. (2019) on 105 millennial employees of a company in Senwell, Indonesia located in Banjarmasin, it was found that there was a positive significant relationship between work-life balance and employee engagement. The authors found that the higher the work-life balance, the higher the employee engagement level. In another study, Dinh (2020) found that work-life balance effects employee engagement in Vietnamese companies. The author suggested that managers should establish open and two-way communications with their employees to create trust and a supportive culture in order to deal with not only organizational tasks but also their concerns about their personal life. Finally, in the study by Sahni (2019) on the effect of quality of work-life on employee engagement on 312 employees working in the Telecom industry of Saudi Arabia, the author found that all the facets of quality of work life affected employee engagement, especially work-life balance, which had one of the strongest relationships with employee engagement. Hence, from this literature review, we propose the following:

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between work-life balance and employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs.

2.4. Work-Life Balance as a Mediator between Leadership Style and Employee Engagement

The review of literature indicates that work-life balance is a possible mediator of leadership style and employee engagement. Previous literature has found a significant positive relationship between leadership style and work-life balance (Berger et al., 2017; Hayati, 2022; Wang et al., 2017) and a significant positive relationship between work-life balance and employee engagement (Dinh, 2020; Larasati et al., 2019; Sahni, 2019). Supriatna’s (2022) study on 500 employees from Bandung Government Agency, Indonesia, found that work-life balance mediates the effects of transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and servant leadership on work engagement. Lastly, Haar et al.’s (2017) study on 123 New Zealand employees from various professions found strong support for servant leadership in predicting work-life balance and work engagement dimensions with full mediation by work-life balance. Hence, from this literature review, we propose the following:

H4: Work-life balance mediates the relationship between leadership style and employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework based on the literature review.

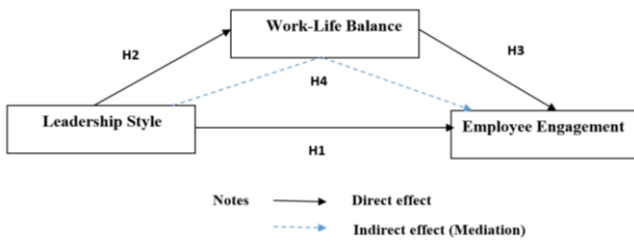


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

3. Research Method

3.1. Sample

This research employed a deductive approach using a quantitative method. Questionnaires were distributed online to employees in various private sectors in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia was preferred as it has the highest gross domestic product (GDP), foreign and direct investment in Malaysia. 150 respondents answered the online questionnaire. The non-probability sampling method

was used in collecting the sample.

3.2. Questionnaire Design

The first part of the questionnaire required respondents to provide their gender, race, age, highest education level, and monthly income level. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions relating to the variables of the study. A five-item scale for leadership style was adapted from Breevaart and Bakker (2018), and a four-item scale for work– life balance was adapted from Jaharuddin and Zainol (2019). Finally, a four-item scale to measure employee engagement adapted from Stranzl et al. (2021) was applied in the questionnaire. Each variable in this study was measured using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 - strongly disagree to 6 - strongly agree.

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis of data was performed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SSPS) software. The overall reliability test of the study was 0.8, while the reliability test for each variable was 0.835 for leadership, 0.885 for work-life balance, and 0.860 for employee engagement. In addition, a normality test was performed through the Z-score calculation in which the Z-score value of 2.2 was within $-3.29 < Z > 3.29$. Moreover, a linearity test was conducted to determine the linearity of the relationships between the independent and dependent variables using a scatter plot graph.

3.4. Demographics of Respondents

Approximately 56.7% of the respondents were female and the remainder 43.3% were male. The respondents’ race comprised 52.7% Chinese and 26.6% Malays. The majority of the respondents (50%) were between the age group of 31 to 40 years old, while 24% were between the age group of 21 to 30 years old. As for the highest qualification, 50.7% of the respondents had a bachelor’s degree, while 37.3% had a diploma. Lastly, 38.7% of the respondents’ monthly income group was within the range of RM3,001 – RM4,000, followed by RM2,001-RM3,000 (29.3%). Table 1 shows the respondents’ demographic profile.

Table 1. Respondents’ demographic profiles

Demographics features		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	65	43.3
	Female	85	56.7
Race	Malay	40	26.6
	Chinese	79	52.7
	Indian	27	18.0
	Others	4	2.7
	Age	21-30	36
	31-40	75	50.0
	41-50	29	19.3
	51-60	10	6.7
Highest Education level	Diploma	56	37.3
	Bachelor’s Degree	76	50.7
	Masters	12	8.0

Continuation of Table 1			
	Others	6	0.6
Monthly Income level	< RM2,000	14	9.3
	RM2,001–RM3,000	44	29.3
	RM3,001–RM4,000	58	38.7
	RM4,001–RM5,000	20	13.3
	> RM5,000	14	9.3

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis showed that the mean value for leadership style was 3.2382 with a standard deviation of 1.57165. This means that employees slightly disagree with the leadership style. However, the mean value of work-life balance was 2.7429 with a standard deviation of 1.19571. This means that employees moderately disagree that work-life balance exists in their workplace. Finally, the mean value for employee engagement was 3.4992 with a standard deviation of 1.6311, indicating a slight disagreement regarding employee engagement.

4.2. Regression and Mediation Analysis

To test linear regression and mediation, Baron and Kenny (1986) recommended four criteria for testing mediation. The first step or condition is to test the total effect of the independent variable (leadership style) on the outcome variable (employee engagement), as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Total effect of leadership style on employee engagement

It is observed that there is a positive linear relationship between leadership style and employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs ($\beta = 0.763$, $p = 0.000$). As such, H1 is accepted. Hence, the first condition has been met. Next, according to Baron and Kenny (1986), the second and third conditions are the testing of relationships between leadership style and work-life balance and work-life balance with employee engagement. Leadership style is the independent variable, employee engagement is the outcome variable, and work-life balance is the mediating variable. It is observed that leadership style has a positive relationship with the work-life balance of employees in Malaysian SMEs ($\beta = 0.555$, $p = 0.000$). As such, H2 is accepted. In addition, work-life balance has a positive significant relationship with employee engagement of Malaysian SMEs ($\beta = 0.849$, $p = 0.000$). As such, H3 is accepted. According to this, the second and third conditions have also been met. Table 2 summarizes the correlation analysis results.

Table 2. Summary of the correlation analysis

	Gradient (Standardized Beta, β)	Significance
Leadership style and employee engagement	0.763	0.000
Leadership style and work-life balance	0.555	0.000
Work-life balance and employee engagement	0.849	0.000

In addition, by including the inclusion of work-life balance in the model, the effect of leadership style ($\beta = 0.623$; $p = 0.000$) on employee engagement of Malaysian SMEs becomes significant. Thus, the fourth condition of Baron and Kenny (1986) has also been met. According to this, the work-life balance of employees in Malaysian SMEs is partially mediated within the relationship between leadership style and employee engagement because the direct effect of leadership style and employee engagement is still significant after work-life balance entered the model, even though the beta coefficient was reduced. As such, H4 is accepted. A Sobel test was conducted to test for mediation using a Sobel calculator (Preacher, & Leonardelli, 2010). The statistics for the Sobel test are 2.69689366 with an

associated p-value of 0.00699896. The results confirmed that job satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between WLB and turnover intention ($Z = 2.69689366$, $p = 0.00699896$). Figure 3 shows the paths for regression analysis, and Table 3 summarizes the paths of the regression analysis.

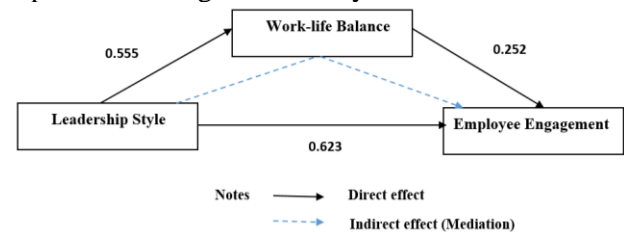


Figure 3. Paths for regression analysis

Table 3. Summary of the paths of regression analysis

Path	Unstandardized Beta, β	Standard error (SE)	t	Significance
Leadership style and work-life balance	0.555	0.036	14.408	0.000
Work-life balance and employee engagement	0.252	0.092	2.729	0.007
Leadership style and employee engagement	0.623	0.070	8.861	0.000

5. Discussion

As shown in Table 2, the results of this study reveal

that leadership style has a significant positive relationship with employee engagement in Malaysian

SMEs, similar to past studies (Ashfaq et al., 2021; Katili et al., 2021; Muddle, 2020). The study also found a significant positive relationship between leadership style and work-life balance among employees in Malaysian SMEs, similar to past studies (Berger et al., 2017; Hayati, 2022, Wang et al., 2017). Likewise, similar to past research, work-life balance is also significantly associated with employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs (Dinh, 2020; Larasati et al., 2019; Sahni, 2019). Lastly, work-life balance partially mediates the relationship between leadership style and employee engagement, as supported by past research (Hayati, 2020).

The findings of this study have theoretical implications for the research results in providing enrichment to empirical studies related to the relationships between leadership style, work-life balance, and employee engagement in SMEs, especially in Malaysia, since studies in this area are limited. Subsequently, the results of this study have practical implications as they will aid policy makers in setting policies that serve to enhance employee engagement through work-life balance and the correct leadership style.

SMEs in Malaysia require a leadership style that can support work-life balance. First, leaders need to set an example of balancing work and life by working on having reasonable working hours, flexible working hours, family-friendly work policies, having interests outside the organization, and demonstrating personal priorities that are different from work responsibilities (Lotich, 2023). This would enhance employee engagement in the workplace.

Furthermore, a type of leadership style such as transformational leaders would foster employee engagement as these leaders are encouraging, motivate, and intellectually stimulate their employees and have individual consideration, which includes considering and listening to staff individually and aiding employees in self-enhancement (Budur, 2020).

SMEs must look into policies that improve work-life balance and employee engagement through the correct leadership style. Policy makers should look into providing leaders with the required training needed to increase employee engagement and promote work-life balance, such as training in emotional intelligence, coaching skills, managing meetings and keeping them timely, motivation skills, and planning and delegating skills (Herrity, 2023). It is vital that SMEs and policy makers look into ways to foster a supportive and inclusive working environment that allows employees to juggle work and life while enhancing employee work engagement. The scientific novelty of the study was the test results, which indicate that employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs is affected by leadership style and work-life balance.

6. Conclusion

The results of this research have provided empirical

knowledge on the significance of leadership style on work-life balance and employee engagement. This study will hopefully foster the creation and implementation of appropriate policies that would enhance work-life balance and employee engagement. However, this cannot be achieved without the involvement of the Malaysian government and policy makers.

There are a few limitations in this study; nevertheless, these limitations can be overcome with future studies. First, it would be good to conduct a study that covers all 14 states in Malaysia and conduct a comparative study to observe if there are any differences in relationships between leadership style, work-life balance, and employee engagement. In addition, since leadership style has a significant effect on work-life balance and employee engagement, future studies could look into the type of leadership style that would promote work-life balance and employee engagement in Malaysian SMEs.

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