

JOB INSECURITY AND WORK ENGAGEMENT IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES OF PAKISTAN: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of private higher education in Pakistan has created competitive and performance-driven institutional environments characterized by contractual employment arrangements and enrollment-based financial pressures. Such conditions may heighten employees' perceptions of job insecurity, potentially undermining positive work-related motivational states. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and the Job Demands Resources (JDR) model, this study examines the relationship between job insecurity and work engagement among employees in private universities in Pakistan. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, and data were collected from 301 academic and administrative staff members across 14 private universities representing all major provinces and administrative units of Pakistan. Job insecurity was measured using De Witte's 4-item scale, while work engagement was assessed using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9). Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated satisfactory model fit. Structural equation modeling revealed a significant negative association between job insecurity and work engagement ($\beta = -0.48$, $p < 0.001$), with job insecurity explaining 23% of the variance in engagement ($R^2 = 0.23$). The findings indicate that perceived employment instability significantly diminishes employees' vigor, dedication, and absorption. The study contributes to the literature by extending job insecurity research to private higher education within an emerging economy context and highlights precarious employment as a structural concern affecting motivational outcomes. Practical implications for institutional policy and employee engagement strategies are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Pakistan's higher education sector has undergone rapid quantitative expansion, particularly within the private domain. The growth of private universities has been driven by increased demand for tertiary education, limited public sector capacity, and market-oriented reforms encouraging privatization and competition (Hoodbhoy, 2009; World Bank, 2019). While this expansion has broadened access, it has also

intensified institutional competition for student enrollment, research funding, and reputational positioning. Within such performance-driven environments, faculty and administrative staff frequently operate under contractual employment arrangements, key performance indicators (KPIs), and resource constraints. These structural conditions may amplify perceptions of employment instability and professional uncertainty.

Job insecurity refers to an employee's perception of the potential threat of job loss or deterioration in job-related features (Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002). It is important to distinguish between objective employment instability (e.g., fixed-term contracts) and subjective job insecurity, which reflects an individual's appraisal of uncertainty regarding employment continuity (De Witte, 2005). The literature conceptualizes job insecurity as a significant psychosocial stressor, associated with diminished psychological wellbeing, reduced organizational commitment, impaired performance, and elevated turnover intentions (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002). Meta-analytic evidence indicates that job insecurity exerts both short-term emotional strain and longer-term motivational withdrawal effects (Cheng & Chan, 2008).

Work engagement, in contrast, represents a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor (high levels of energy and resilience), dedication (strong involvement and sense of significance), and absorption (full concentration and immersion in work) (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Grounded in the Job Demands Resources (JDR) model, work engagement is considered a central motivational construct that mediates the relationship between workplace conditions and performance outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Engaged employees demonstrate higher productivity, creativity, organizational citizenship behavior, and psychological wellbeing.

Theoretically, job insecurity may undermine work engagement by depleting psychological resources, increasing cognitive preoccupation with potential job loss, and disrupting employees' sense of control and future orientation. From a conservation of resources perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), perceived threats to employment stability represent resource loss or anticipated loss, which can reduce motivational investment in work roles. Empirical studies conducted primarily in Western contexts suggest that job insecurity negatively predicts engagement, partly through increased emotional exhaustion and reduced organizational trust (De Cuyper et al., 2008; Mauno et al., 2007). However, findings are not always uniform, and contextual moderators such as labor market volatility, cultural values, and

institutional structures may shape the magnitude of this relationship.

Despite extensive international research, relatively limited empirical attention has been directed toward examining job insecurity and work engagement within emerging economies, particularly in private higher education institutions in South Asia. In Pakistan's private university sector, where contract-based appointments, enrollment-driven revenue models, and performance-linked evaluations are common, job insecurity may carry distinct psychological and motivational implications. Moreover, the cultural context characterized by collectivism and economic uncertainty may influence how employees interpret and respond to employment instability.

This study addresses this contextual and empirical gap by investigating the direct relationship between job insecurity and work engagement among employees working in private universities in Pakistan. By situating the analysis within an emerging economy and a competitive higher education environment, the study contributes to the broader literature on occupational stress and positive organizational psychology. It also provides evidence relevant to institutional policymakers seeking to enhance employee engagement and organizational sustainability in rapidly evolving academic markets.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Job Insecurity

Job insecurity has been conceptualized as a subjective perception of employment instability (Sverke et al., 2002). It includes both quantitative insecurity (fear of job loss) and qualitative insecurity (fear of losing valued job features). According to the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), job insecurity constitutes a threat to valued resources, including income, status, and career continuity. Resource threat triggers stress responses and reduces psychological investment in work roles. Private university employees in Pakistan often work under contractual arrangements, making job insecurity particularly salient.

2.2 Work Engagement

Work engagement is characterized by:

- Vigor (high energy and resilience),

- Dedication (strong involvement and sense of significance),
- Absorption (being fully concentrated and engrossed in work) (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

2.3 Job Insecurity and Work Engagement

Job insecurity undermines employees' sense of stability and control, reducing their willingness to invest effort into work roles. Under COR theory, when employees perceive resource threat, they conserve remaining resources rather than expend additional energy. Empirical research indicates that job insecurity is negatively related to engagement and organizational commitment (Sverke et al., 2002). In private higher education contexts where performance pressure is high, insecurity may lead to disengagement as a protective mechanism. Therefore, following hypothesis has been formulated:

- i. Job insecurity is negatively associated with work engagement among employees in private universities in Pakistan.*

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between job insecurity and work engagement among employees working in private universities in Pakistan.

3.2 Sampling Strategy

Pakistan comprises seven provinces/administrative units: Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, Azad Jammu & Kashmir, and Islamabad Capital Territory. From each province/administrative unit, two private universities were randomly selected based on institutional size and accessibility, resulting in a total of 14 private universities included in the sampling frame. All academic and administrative employees within the selected institutions were invited to participate voluntarily.

3.3 Recruitment Procedure

Data was collected through an online survey. Recruitment was primarily conducted via social

media platforms and university-affiliated digital communities, including Facebook groups and official pages, Instagram group chats and student societies, and X (formerly Twitter) professional networks. The survey link was distributed electronically. Participation was voluntary, and the questionnaire began with an informed consent statement outlining the purpose of the study, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time.

3.4 Participants

A total of $N = 327$ responses were received. After excluding incomplete questionnaires, the final sample comprised $N = 301$ participants. Of the respondents, 65% were academic faculty members and 35% were administrative staff. The mean age was 34.8 years ($SD = 7.9$), and the average organizational tenure was 5.6 years. The sample consisted of 58% male and 42% female participants.

3.5 Measures

- i.* Job insecurity was assessed using the 4-item scale developed by De Witte (2000). A sample item is: "I feel insecure about the future of my job." The scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$).
- ii.* Work engagement was measured using the 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), capturing vigor, dedication, and absorption. A sample item is: "At my job, I feel strong and vigorous." Internal consistency was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).
- iii.* All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

3.6 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS and AMOS/SmartPLS. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess construct validity, followed by structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized direct effect of job insecurity on work engagement.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the results of this study. The confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the

measurement model demonstrated satisfactory fit to the data. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.95) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI = 0.93) exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 0.90, suggesting good model fit. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.06) fell within the acceptable range (≤ 0.06), indicating minimal approximation error. Additionally, all standardized factor loadings were above 0.60, confirming adequate convergent validity of the constructs. The structural model results revealed that job insecurity was significantly and negatively associated with work engagement ($\beta = -0.48, p < 0.001$). The magnitude

of the standardized path coefficient indicates a moderate-to-strong inverse relationship, suggesting that higher perceptions of job insecurity correspond with lower levels of engagement among employees in private universities. Furthermore, the model explained 23% of the variance in work engagement ($R^2 = 0.23$), indicating that job insecurity constitutes a meaningful predictor of engagement in this context. Overall, the findings support the hypothesized negative relationship between job insecurity and work engagement.

Table 1: Summary of Measurement and Structural Model Results

Model Component	Indicator	Values
Measurement Model	CFI	0.95
	TLI	0.93
	RMSEA	0.05
	Standardized factor loadings	> 0.60
Structural Model	Path coefficient	$\beta = -0.48$
	Significance level	$p < 0.001$
	Variance explained (R^2)	0.23

5. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between job insecurity and work engagement among employees working in private universities in Pakistan. The findings demonstrate that higher perceived job insecurity is significantly associated with lower levels of work engagement. This result supports the proposed hypothesis and aligns with prior empirical evidence indicating that employment uncertainty undermines positive work-related attitudes (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al., 2002). Consistent with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), perceived threats to employment stability appear to diminish employees' willingness to invest psychological energy in their work roles. When individuals anticipate potential resource loss such as income security, professional

status, or career continuity they may engage in defensive resource conservation strategies. In this context, reduced vigor, dedication, and absorption may reflect protective mechanisms aimed at minimizing further psychological depletion. Furthermore, within private higher education institutions characterized by contractual employment arrangements and enrollment-driven performance pressures, job insecurity may operate as a chronic stressor rather than a temporary concern. Unlike short-term uncertainty, persistent perceptions of instability can gradually erode motivational states central to engagement. This finding is consistent with the Job Demands Resources (JDR) model, which conceptualizes job security as a critical job resource that fuels motivation and engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). When such resources are threatened, engagement is likely to decline.

6. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to literature in three primary ways.

- i. First, it extends job insecurity research to the private higher education sector within an emerging economy context. Much of the existing literature has been conducted in Western or industrialized settings. By focusing on Pakistan, this study provides contextual evidence from a competitive and rapidly expanding academic market.
- ii. Second, the findings empirically demonstrate a direct negative association between job insecurity and work engagement. While previous research has frequently emphasized outcomes such as burnout or turnover intentions (Sverke et al., 2002), the present study highlights engagement a positive motivational construct as a key outcome variable.
- iii. Third, the study underscores precarious employment structures as a systemic concern within private academic institutions. Rather than framing job insecurity solely as an individual perception, the findings suggest that institutional employment arrangements may shape broader motivational climates.

7. Practical Implications

- i. The results carry important implications for institutional management within private universities. Given the significant negative association between job insecurity and engagement, university administrations should consider interventions aimed at reducing perceived employment uncertainty.
- ii. Practical strategies may include improving contract transparency, clearly communicating institutional stability and long-term strategic plans, reducing ambiguity regarding renewal policies, and strengthening perceived organizational support. Transparent communication and consistent renewal procedures may reduce uncertainty-related stress and foster trust.
- iii. Enhancing perceptions of stability and support may contribute not only to improved engagement but also to institutional performance, given the established link between engagement and productivity (Christian et al., 2011). In competitive higher education environments, sustaining employee

motivation is critical for academic quality and organizational sustainability.

8. Limitations and Future Research

- i. Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Although theoretical frameworks suggest that job insecurity precedes reductions in engagement, longitudinal designs are necessary to establish temporal directionality.
- ii. Second, the reliance on self-report data may introduce common method bias. Future studies could incorporate multi-source data, such as supervisor ratings or objective performance indicators, to enhance methodological rigor.
- iii. Future research should adopt longitudinal or time-lagged designs to better examine causal mechanisms. Additionally, potential moderating variables such as perceived organizational support, leadership style, psychological capital, or labor market conditions may further clarify the strength and boundary conditions of the relationship between job insecurity and engagement.

9. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that job insecurity significantly undermines work engagement among employees in private universities in Pakistan. In competitive higher education environments characterized by contractual employment and performance pressures, perceived employment instability may weaken motivational states central to institutional effectiveness. Addressing employment uncertainty through transparent policies and supportive organizational practices is therefore essential for sustaining employee engagement and promoting long-term institutional success.

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