RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gratitude and work engagement: The mediating role of employee resilience

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between perceived gratitude and work engagement in Indonesia and examines whether employee resilience mediates the relationship between perceived gratitude and work engagement. This study utilizes an online self-administered questionnaire that includes established measures associated with perceived gratitude, employee resilience, and work engagement – in addition to various demographic questions. The study sample consists of 205 respondents working as merchandisers in Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) field under outsourcing companies. This study applies a mediation model in Hayes Process to examine the data. The findings suggest that perceived gratitude is positively related to employee resilience, while employee resilience is positively associated with work engagement. In addition, employee resilience mediates the relationship between perceived gratitude and work engagement. Based on the findings, outsourcing companies are encouraged to deliver workplace-perceived gratitude training to make their employees psychologically resilient, leading to more engagement at work. The present study's findings contribute to the literature on work engagement by explaining how perceived gratitude as a bottom-up strategy can help employees be more engaged in their work.

INTRODUCTION

Work engagement has become an important topic of interest for academics and practitioners (H. Chen et al., 2020; van Mol et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2020). Work engagement is an excellent antecedent of favorable organizational success (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018); for example, employee productivity (Bakker et al., 2012), company's bottom line (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009), workgroup effort (Rahmadani et al., 2020), intention to quit (Lee et al., 2019) and sense of satisfaction at work (Orgambídez-Ramos & de Almeida, 2017). It is imperative for organizations to make sure that their employees are fully engaged since the human resources feature is pivotal to organizations' productivity (Lu et al., 2014).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, work engagement has become an important issue due to its impact on productivity (Ojo et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all economic sectors

in all countries, including Indonesia. Moreover, one of the business sectors significantly affected by the pandemic is Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG). The pandemic hit this industry because it relies on physical stores, and the trading process can be done offline only (Asmara, 2021). By the time this research was ongoing, the government had made restrictions to prevent the virus from spreading further, allowing only 50% of customers to visit the stores with shorter operational hours (Asmara, 2021). Such restrictions have made FMCG face structural changes such as stay-at-home consumption, health and well-being, and sustainability, making the industrial performance of the FMCG sector paint unfavorable results.

As frontier manages the layout of products to attract customers, merchandisers contribute to the sales team's performance. Merchandisers work by connecting customers with featured products (Arviana, 2021). Many merchandisers work under third-party contracts or are usually known as outsourcing employees. The covid situation has impacted the work engagement level of these workers. Due to the pandemic, downsizing has been done in many companies, and employees with the lowest employment status are prone to dismissal. Therefore, an effort to foster work engagement among merchandisers in FMCG companies is vital to be investigated further.

Organizations can support their employees' work engagement using top-down and bottom-up approaches (Bakker, 2017). The first means involve transformational leadership interventions and strategic human resources practices. The second means taken into account include individual efforts, for instance, crafting the job, self-help, using a strong personal point, and deploying ego capacities. Organizations are able to determine which strategy is excellent for supporting both environmental and personal resources. This research uses gratitude as the bottom-up approach to predict work engagement.

Previously, gratitude is used in the context of sports (Gabana et al., 2022) and depressive symptoms in adolescence (Scott et al., 2021). and many other life settings. Today, gratitude is essential in supporting workplace productivity (Nourpanah, 2021) since it is considered one of the positive psychology variables at work (Mills et al., 2013). Furthermore, gratitude impacts work engagement (K. Kim et al., 2020). Gratitude is considered one of the positive virtues at work (Iavicoli et al., 2018). Employees who show gratitude are most likely to have a positive religious identity, which will positively impact their well-being at work (Donaldson et al., 2019; Héliot et al., 2019).

Although it is clear that workplace gratitude has a positive correlation with work engagement, this study argues that there is a mediating mechanism between gratitude and work engagement. Employee resilience is the mediating variable between gratitude and work engagement. Resilience is getting more attention due to its application in the workplace (Delgado et al., 2021; Samo et al., 2021; Talavera-Velasco et al., 2021). Many studies explain the association between gratitude and resilience. First, gratitude appears to be a significant predictor of resilience among undergraduate students (Gupta & Kumar, 2015). Second, gratitude intervention has improved resilience among adolescents (Lijo & Annalakshmi, 2017). Third, gratitude impacts psychological counselors' resilience (Arnout & Almoied, 2021). Fourth, gratitude interventions are also essential to enhance resilience among adolescents with divorced parents (Shabrina et al., 2020). Finally, gratitude impacts psychological resilience in adolescents (Du et al., 2021; Kong et al., 2021) and military veterans (McGuire et al., 2021).

Employees who show gratitude enable themselves to work effectively in social environments (Bono & Sender, 2018). By showing gratitude, they will be more resilient in achieving important work goals. Cultivating grateful behavior may help to build resilience in facing challenges (Jans-Beken et al., 2020).

Employees will endure more when meeting obstacles at work, so resilience becomes an imperative variable regarding mental health at work.

Moreover, many other studies also explain the association between resilience and work engagement. For example, resilience is found to have a direct effect on working engagement in various occupations (Kašpárková et al., 2018), hemodialysis nurses (Cao & Chen, 2021a, 2021b), nurses (Clark et al., 2021), academic and university staffs (Okun & Arun, 2020), village doctors (Zhang et al., 2021), and employees in Portugal (Cantante-Rodrigues et al., 2021). Being resilient can stimulate one's engagement at work (Ojo et al., 2021), so resilience is vital in supporting work engagement, especially during tough times.

Based on previous findings, this research aims to investigate the mediating effect of resilience in the gratitude-work engagement relationship. Finally, the authors stated the research problem: can employee resilience mediate between gratitude and work engagement? Work engagement is generally defined as a positive work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Demerouti et al., 2001). Vigour is when an employee shows vital energy and psychological durability at work. Dedication is noticed by an employee when he or she feels that the job is inspiring and significant. Lastly, absorption is defined as delivering complete immersion and a profound connection with the job. Therefore, engaged employees deliver optimum energy and intense focus and are happily occupied finishing their tasks (Hakanen et al., 2018).

The concept of work engagement was first introduced by Kahn (1990) as the "harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances." It stated that employees possess different roles in organizations and work on their roles by using different degrees of themselves, cognitively, physically, and emotionally (Kahn, 1990). For example, a personally engaged employee can be seen as someone who shows physical involvement, cognitive awareness, and an empathetic connection with co-workers. Previous research has indicated that work engagement has a positive association with physical/mental health (Schleupner & Kühnel, 2021), work performance (W. Kim et al., 2013; Suzuki et al., 2015), well-being (Garg & Singh, 2020; Rusu & Colomeischi, 2020), while it has negative association with burnout and turnover (Ivanovic et al., 2020; Santhanam & Srinivas, 2020).

In general, gratitude is appreciating valuable and meaningful things in one's life. It is one of the positive psychology concepts that employees can apply in the workplace (Beck, 2016; Cortini et al., 2019). This concept is relevant to employee well-being and functioning as it has increased life satisfaction (Kong et al., 2015; Yildirim & Alanazi, 2018) and individual self-esteem (L. H. Chen & Wu, 2014; Lin, 2015). As people spend most of their time in the workplace, gratitude has become essential to be more engaged with the workload (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Previous studies have highlighted the relationships between gratitude with the increased motivation and behavior (Grant & Gino, 2010; McCullough et al., 2001), increased well-being through fulfilling psychological needs (Froh et al., 2008; Killen & Macaskill, 2015), increased productivity in the working place (Patil et al., 2018; Stegen & Wankier, 2018), and increased helping behavior (Sawyer et al., 2021).

Resilience is evidently beneficial for employees to adapt to unpredictable and exigent working circumstances where work roles are mentally arduous (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019; Parker, 2014). In a workplace, resilient employees show their self-confidence to accept and adapt when disturbances occur (Richardson et al., 1990), sustaining them through challenges (Kuntz et al., 2016). Previous research empirically shows that burnout in the workplace can be avoided by having resilience

(Strümpfer, 2003). In the meantime, resilient individuals can sustain adversity and disruptions (Cooper et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 1990).

Based on the description of employee resilience as "the capacity of employees to utilize resources to continually adapt and develop, even when faced with challenging circumstances" (Jackson et al., 2007; Kuntz et al., 2016), the authors use this definition to indicate that employee resilience is a developable potentiality to adjust to any kinds of disturbances and seek opportunities for continuous improvement that requires an enabling organizational context. Having capacities to adjust quickly, resilient employees will eventually give rise to enhanced levels of work engagement (Hodliffe, 2014). Subsequently, organizations should consider employee resilience an imperative strategic resource to promote work engagement (Y. Lee et al., 2016).

The Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R) (introduced by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) is the primary reference in most work engagement studies. The JD–R model supposes that risk factors associated with job-related stress do exist in any work (Barello et al., 2021; Frank et al., 2017). These factors are categorized into two general categories: job demands and resources (Nielsen et al., 2011). Accordingly, the JD-R Model comprises an interaction between demands and resources.

The model benefits the alleviating roles, such as preventing oversupply by affecting the connection between depletion and needs. The authors use this JD-R model to contribute to the prevailing literature. The authors hypothesize (Ha) that (1) gratitude shows a positive correlation with work engagement, (2) gratitude shows a positive correlation with employee resilience, (3) employee resilience shows a positive correlation with work engagement, and (4) employee resilience mediates gratitude and work engagement in the study sample as shown in Figure 1.
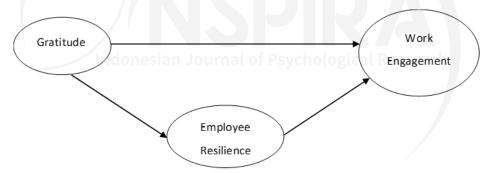

Figure 1. Hypothesized Model

This study is important in some ways. First, this study can enrich the existing literature by adding new research on workplace gratitude. This enrichment becomes important since research on workplace gratitude is still minimal (Locklear et al., 2022). Second, this study integrates gratitude and resilience as strengths at work. This effort is also essential since there is a need to examine strengths used to increase well-being at work (Miglianico et al., 2019). The model proposed by this study becomes a novel contribution to the existing literature.

METHOD

A quantitative correlational study with a cross-sectional research design was used to conduct this study. This study collected data on three variables from a specific population at one point. Research participants were male and female contract employees working in several outsourcing companies in Greater Jakarta and surrounding cities who are placed as merchandisers under the various FMCG companies. They must work for a minimum of 6 months tenure. The online questionnaires were

distributed using convenience sampling as a non-probability technique. A research assistant supported the authors by contacting some outsourcing companies to distribute the online questionnaires link. The research assistant also went to some supermarkets to approach some merchandisers by informing the link. The research assistant asked them to deliver the questionnaire link to their colleagues. Data were collected from June to October 2021. All participants were informed that participation was done voluntarily and that there was no reward. The authors also highlighted that all data would be confidential and used only for academic purposes. The authors selected 205 questionnaires for the latter analysis to ensure their quality.

In this study, gratitude acts as an independent variable, employee resilience acts as a mediating variable, and work engagement is the dependent variable. There were three scales used to collect data: 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), 10-item Gratitude at Work Scale (GAWS) (Cain et al., 2019), and 9-item Employee Resilience Scale (ERS) (Näswall et al., 2019). Two separate experts in organizational psychology supported the translation and back-translation process. Participants were directed to respond to the given scales.

All scales evaluate participants' own attitudes. UWES has a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always). One of the items is *"Di tempat kerja, saya merasa penuh dengan energi"* (At my work, I feel bursting with energy). GAWS has a five-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always). Example of GAWS item is *"Seberapa sering Anda merasa bersyukur untuk gaji dan tunjangan yang Anda terima?"* (How often are you grateful for the salary and benefits?). ERS has a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Example of ERS item is *"Saya belajar dari kesalahan-kesalahan saya dan memperbaiki cara saya bekerja"* (I learn from my mistakes and improve the way I do my job). Different scale points were selected to follow the original scale.

Macro Process on SPSS from Hayes was used to test the mediation. It is powerful for predicting the path coefficients and creating bootstrap confidence intervals for total and specific indirect effects of X on Y (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

RESULT

Table 1 shows the participants' demographic information, including gender, age, work location, job tenure, product, and education.

Table 1. Demographic of participants *(n = 205)*

Category	n (%)
Gender	
Male	82 (40.0%)
Female	123 (60.0%)
Age (year)	
18-12	51 (24.9%)
23-27	135 (65.8%)
28-32	13 (6.3%)
33-37	6 (2.9%)
Work Location	
Bekasi	28 (13.7%)
Bogor	25 (12.2%)
Depok	33 (16.1%)
Jakarta	98 (47.8%)
Karawang	5 (2.4%)
Tangerang	16 (7.8%)
Job Tenure (year)	
1-2	135 (65.8%)
3-4	57 (27.8%)

Category	n (%)
5-6	11 (5.4%)
>6	2 (0.9%)
Product	
Body Care	41 (20.0%)
Foods and Beverages	129 (62.9%)
Drugs	8 (3.9%)
Others	27 (13.2%)
Educational Level	
High School	173 (84.4%)
Diploma	16 (7.8%)
Bachelor	16 (7.8%)

The correlation analyses (Table 2) explained our variables. Hypothesis 1 stated a positive relationship between gratitude and work engagement. Table 2 shows that gratitude positively correlated with work engagement *(r = 0.155, p < 0.05)*. Data support Hypothesis 1. Employees with a high level of gratitude tend to deliver higher work engagement. Hypothesis 2 stated a positive relationship between gratitude and employee resilience. Table 2 shows that gratitude positively correlated with employee resilience *(r = 0.274, p < 0.01)*. Data support Hypothesis 2. Employees who possess a high level of gratitude tend to have a higher level of resilience. Hypothesis 3 stated a positive relationship between employee resilience and work engagement. Table 3 shows that employee resilience positively correlated with work engagement *(r = 0.346, p < 0.01)*. Data support Hypothesis 3. Employees with a high level of resilience tend to deliver higher work engagement.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Gratitude	35.34	2.349	1		
Employee resilience	44.10	1.775	0.274**	1	
Work engagement	48.57	2.305	0.155*	0.346**	1

*n = 205 ** p < 0.01 * p < 0.05*

Table 3. Correlation path analysis between gratitude and work engagement with employee resilience as a mediator

Path analysis	b	SE	95% CI		Significance
			LL	UL	
Gratitude → Employee Resilience	0.21**	0.05	0.11	0.31	Significant
Employee resilience → Work engagement	0.433**	0.09	0.25	0.60	Significant
Gratitude → Work engagement	0.06	0.07	-0.07	0.20	Not significant

*n = 205 **p < 0.01. *p < 0.05 CI = Confidence Interval*

The study's results consisted of descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean and standard deviations, assumptions test results, and hypotheses test results, which were then critically analyzed and presented in a sequential or integrated manner. The explanation of the results section contains the results of the data analysis. If the research is qualitative, the findings can be conveyed through patterns, themes, tendencies, and motives that emerge from the data.

DISCUSSION

It is hypothesized that employee resilience mediates between gratitude and work engagement. Hypothesis (Ha) is accepted by looking at the results. This study contributes to the existing literature by uncovering new mechanisms from gratitude to work engagement through the mediation of employee resilience. This result is different from other previous studies. Gratitude directly impacts work engagement (Qing et al., 2021). Gratitude was found to be the impact of resilience (Agnieszka et al., 2020), not the other way around, as supported by this study. Gratitude was placed as moderating variable in the relationship between happiness and resilience (Llenares et al., 2020). Resilience was

placed as moderating variable in the relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement (Danquah, 2021). Another study found an indirect effect between resilience and work engagement mediated by positive affect (Wang et al., 2017). Last, work engagement was found to be a predictor of resilience, and its relationship is mediated by job crafting (Van Wingerden & Poell, 2019). This study clarifies that employees' gratitude may lead to higher resilience and impact work engagement.

The authors would like to assert how employee resilience can mediate between gratitude and work engagement. Gratitude becomes a vital predictor of work engagement because this variable seems relevant to them regarding their employment status. When talking about outsourcing status, variables such as leadership, HR practices, and other organizational variables) may not be relevant to them. Although they might feel insecure about their jobs, they can practice gratitude themselves. Outsourcing employees are still grateful that they can secure a job, although the status is not permanent employees (Mahardayani & Dhania, 2014).

Respondents of this study are merchandisers with employment status as outsourcing employees. They work under a third-party company. These employees must achieve the target given by their supervisor as someone not working under the same company. This situation creates role ambiguity. Employees working under an outsourcing company have a higher level of role ambiguity than permanent employees (Vinahapsari, 2019). However, they still try their best to perform well. This situation indeed forces their resilience at work.

Moreover, the latest physical and social restrictions put them in a demanding situation. Therefore, they must adapt anytime quickly they face obstacles while working. These facts may explain why resilience becomes essential in explaining the relationship between gratitude and work engagement.

The authors met several limitations during the research process. First, the study sample portrays a small number (n=205) in contrast with the entire population. Participants were also heterogeneous since they came from different workplaces. This condition urges careful consideration before generalizing the result. Second, there is still potential bias due to the self-administered and cross-sectional manner. Third, standard method variance (CMV) could still impact the results. This study highlights the importance of resilience as a mediating mechanism in explaining the relationship between gratitude and work engagement for all the above limitations.

CONCLUSION

This study intended to add to the present literature by examining personal resources to predict work engagement. A cross-sectional quantitative approach was chosen to answer the research question. It is concluded that resilience mediates the relationship between gratitude and work engagement.

As a practical recommendation, outsourcing companies can conduct customized training for merchandisers on workplace gratitude exercises. In addition, future research is recommended to target a larger sample to improve generalization. Using multiple organizations and probability sampling techniques is also recommended instead of snowball sampling with a larger sample size. Also, organizational studies may benefit from gathering longitudinal data.

DECLARATION

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Author contribution statement

Endro Puspo Wiroko composed the research background, data analysis, and discussion. Dwi Sugiharti helped with the literature review part and also supported the discussion.

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Data access statement

The data described in this article can be accessed by contacting the first author.

Declaration of interest's statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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