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## LET IT GO! THE MEDIATING ROLE OF NEGATIVE AFFECT IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACCEPTANCE AND WORK ENGAGEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

For the past few years, researchers have paid a great deal of attention to antecedent variables of work engagement, such as job characteristics, organizational support, core self-identity, and self-efficacy, and empirical studies of acceptance have been rather rare and incomplete. Based on the job demands–resources model and affective event theory, the present study's authors aimed to examine the role of affect in the link between acceptance and work engagement. A cross-sectional study was carried out, using a valid sample of 337 full-time Chinese employees. Pearson correlation analysis and structural equation modelling were used to examine the relationships between acceptance, negative affect, positive affect, and work engagement in full-time employees. Results suggested that acceptance was negatively associated with negative affect and was positively related to both positive affect and work engagement. Furthermore, negative affect mediated the effect of acceptance on work engagement. In conclusion, this study determined that acceptance contains affective, resource-conserving, and motivational benefits for work engagement.

**Keywords:** Acceptance, Negative Affect, Work Engagement, Job Demands–Resources Model, Affective Event Theory



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Following developments in positive psychology, there has been a growing public awareness of positive subjective experiences, positive personal traits, and positive organizations (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Not only do employees' cognitive, affective, and physical experiences at their job have an effect on their health, well-being, and career development, but also they play an important role in organizational effectiveness. Since 1990, work engagement has gradually become a hot area of organizational psychology. Work engagement refers to an energetic and effective state in which employees concentrate on their work activities and have faith in themselves (Schaufeli et al., 2002). In contrast with burnout, Schaufeli et al. (2002) proposed that engagement was an opposite concept, which might be measured with different instruments, including three components: Vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience, which indicates that employees are willing to put effort into work tasks and are persistent in the face of difficulties. Dedication means that individuals are immersed in work activities and have a sense of significance, passion, pride, and challenge. Absorption is characterized by people fully concentrating and satisfied with work, whereby time flies quickly and one feels difficulty in detaching oneself from work.

Hayes et al. (1999) defined acceptance as a tendency to accept one's negative mental and affective experiences without assessing or resisting, which in turn helps attenuate those experiences and allows one to behave without their influence. Acceptance is a positive and non-judging state for past experiences, rather than being simply tolerant, and it has been identified as an important personal resource for effectiveness at work (Bond & Bunce, 2003). Although the effects of acceptance on well-being have been fully discussed, its influence on work engagement has not gained consistent results (Kuba & Scheibe, 2016). Regulation of affect results in cognitive demands, and subsequent rumination increases demands for cognitive resources, which distracts individuals' attention from the task at hand (Beal et al., 2005). However, Bond et al. (2008) proposed that we have more attentional resources available to notice goal-related opportunities when the level of acceptance is high. Under this circumstance, behaviors can be converted into the pursuit of goals (Bond et al., 2008; Hayes et al., 2004).

As mentioned above, work engagement played a critical role in industrial and organizational psychology; a large body of studies has emphasized its importance to job performance (Salanova et al., 2005), job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (Alarcon & Edwards, 2011), and researchers have tried to find antecedent variables of work engagement from a job resources perspective. However, studies on the job demands-resources model (JD-R model) have been restricted to job resources and have ignored the importance of employees' personal resources (e.g., acceptance, self-efficacy, organizational-based self-esteem, and optimism), which may be important predictors of their adaptation to work environments (Hobfoll, 1989). In the present study, we examined the relationship between acceptance and work engagement and cleared up a long-standing mystery about the mediating effect of negative affect.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Acceptance and work engagement

Acceptance is one of the basic processes of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT); it teaches individuals to notice their affective experiences and thoughts but to behave based on their values and goals rather than on their internal states (Hayes et al., 1999). Empirical studies have suggested that high levels of acceptance were associated with mental health (e.g., less negative affect results in depressive or anxiety symptoms, and more positive affect results in psychological well-being; Ford et al., 2017) and positive occupational outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction and job performance; Bond et al., 2003). Furthermore, stress management interventions based on ACT increased personal efficiency, and the improvements existed after 1 month (Brinkborg et al., 2011), 10 weeks (Stafford-Brown & Pakenham, 2012), and 1 year (Bond et al., 2008). Prior studies on motivational benefits of acceptance have not obtained identical results before now. Clark and Loxton (2012) found that acceptance had a positive effect on participant's work engagement when one's job demands was high. However, Kuba et al. (2016) conducted a diary study, and this revealed that acceptance did not predict daily work engagement.

Demerouti et al. (2001) proposed the JD-R model, which classified the characteristics of work environments as two categories (job demands and job resources). Job demands (e.g., high work pressure and emotional demands) predict job strain (Bakker et al., 2004), whereas job resources (e.g., social support and performance feedback) are strong predictors of work engagement (Hakanen et al., 2006) and organizational commitment (Demerouti et al., 2001; Salanova et al., 2005). Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) examined the effectiveness of personal resources and expanded the JD-R model; to explain the variance in work engagement, they proposed that personal resources contributed. Bond et al. (2003) proposed that acceptance was an important personal resource for effectiveness at work. Therefore, we can infer the first hypothesis: Acceptance is positively related to work engagement.



## 2.2 Acceptance and affect

*Affect* refers to a mental state that depends on evaluating feelings, which can be clarified as overall positivity or negativity. Positive affect (PA) reflects to the extent to which an individual feels enthusiastic, active, and alert; people with high levels of positive affect have high energy, full concentration, and pleasurable engagement (Watson et al., 1988). By contrast, negative affect (NA) refers to unidimensional, pervasive, and aversive emotional states (Chen & Spector, 1991), including subjective feelings of scorn, anger, nervousness, disgust, guilt, fear, and sadness, with a low level of negative affect being a state of calmness and serenity. (Watson et al., 1988).

Previous research has shown that acceptance is negatively associated with a general negative affect (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006). An individual with acceptance is less likely to ruminate and suppress one's mental experiences, which is futile and counterproductive (Ford et al., 2017). Simons and Gaher (2005) found that accepting affective experiences led to natural attenuation and relatively short duration, which didn't exacerbate the negative influence. Therefore, acceptance predicted a lower level of negative affect (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006). However, fewer empirical studies about acceptance have examined positive emotion and acquired consistent results (Ford et al., 2017), so exploring the relationship between acceptance and positive affect is important and constructive. Therefore, based on the literature reviewed, we could infer the following hypotheses: that acceptance is negatively related to negative affect (Hypotheses 2a) and that acceptance is related to positive affect (Hypotheses 2b).

## 2.3 The mediating role of affect

In addition to the direct relationship between acceptance and work engagement, we speculated that negative affect is a key variable that mediates the effect of acceptance on work engagement.

In the present study, we targeted negative affect as a potential mediator in the relationship between acceptance and work engagement. High level of negative affect disrupts employees' work activities, leading to tense psychological processes and failures in automation of cognitive resources and behavioral choices (Fredrickson et al., 2003; Koole & Jostmann, 2004). Positive affect facilitates approach behavior, which urges employees to set goals and to be engaged in achieving these aims (Cacioppo et al., 1999). And positive affect, such as enthusiasm, satisfaction, and comfort, could predict work and task engagement (Salanova et al., 2011). In addition, Ouweneel et al. (2012) conducted a diary study, and the results revealed that the experience of positive affect had an indirect effect on the level of vigor, dedication, and absorption.

According to affective events theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1966), employees' affective experiences not only explain affective work behaviors directly, but they also have an indirect effect on work behaviors through individual attitudes. Based on this perspective, we assumed that if an individual has a high level of acceptance, they might experience less negative affect; such negative affective experiences would have a negative influence on their work engagement. Correspondingly, the individual experiences more positive affect, which is helpful for one's work engagement. Therefore, we could infer the following hypotheses: that negative affect mediates the relationship between acceptance and work engagement (Hypotheses 3a) and that positive affect mediates the relationship between acceptance and work engagement (Hypothesis 3b).

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Participants and procedure

All participants provided online informed consents and were then instructed to complete a survey online, whose data was kept completely anonymous. A total of 345 full-time employees in mainland China were enrolled in this study; eight participants were excluded because of missing data of tenure and daily working hours. 62.91% of the subjects were female, and 37.09% of them were male. They held different positions across different types of organizations (e.g., government departments, public institutions, state-owned enterprises, private enterprises, and foreign-funded enterprises).

In the sample of 337 valid participants, 2.97% were younger than 20 years old, 64.39% were between 21 and 30 years old, 23.44% were between 31 and 40 years old, 7.42% were between 41 and 50 years old, and 1.78% were above 50 years old. Regarding marital status, 46.59% of the subjects were single, 51.04% were married, and 2.37% were divorced. Regarding the subjects' levels of education, 7.12% had a degree at the senior high school level or below, 22.26% had a degree at the junior college level, 65.58% had an undergraduate degree, and 5.04% had a master's degree or above. For ranking of positions, 54.30% were junior staff, 24.93% were first-line managers, 18.40% were middle managers, and 2.37% were top managers. Hours of work per day indicated that 8.61% worked less than 8 hours, 69.14% worked 8 hours, and 22.26% worked more than 8 hours.



## 3.2 Measures

### 3.2.1 Acceptance

Acceptance was measured by the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II) developed by Bond et al. (2011), which improved the shortcomings of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-I. The scale contained seven items (e.g., “My painful memories prevent me from having a fulfilling life”), and all statements were rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never true*) to 7 (*always true*). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the scale was .86.

### 3.2.2 Affect

Affect was measured by the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) developed by Watson et al. (1988). The scale consists of two subscales: a 10-item negative affect scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ) and a 10-item positive affect scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ). Respondents indicated the extent to which they had experienced each negative affect on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

### 3.2.3 Work engagement

Work engagement was measured by the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002), which was adapted from the 17-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). The UWES-9 includes three components: vigor (three items; e.g., “At my work, I feel bursting with energy”), dedication (three items; e.g., “I am enthusiastic about my job”) and absorption (three items; e.g., “I feel happy when I am working intensely”). Respondents indicated the frequency of having experienced each feeling at work by rating the item from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .92 for the UWES-9 full scale and .81 (vigor), .90 (dedication), and .81 (absorption) for the three subscales.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Common method variance

Because we measured acceptance, negative affect, positive affect, and work engagement by self-report questionnaires, there might be a common method variance (CMV) problem. In order to test whether this was the case, we implemented Harman’s one-factor test to check the CMV and conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to check the data. If more than one factor emerged from the EFA or the largest one only explained a small number of the variance, there were no common method biases. The results showed that five factors were extracted, the largest one accounting for 26.52% of the total variance, which means that CMV was not a problem in this study.

### 4.2 Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

The means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of the research variables are shown in Table 1. Hypothesis 1 predicted that acceptance would be positively related to work engagement, while Hypothesis 2 predicted that acceptance would be related to both negative affect (2a) and positive affect (2b). Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships between the variables. Acceptance was significantly positively related to both work engagement ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ) and positive affect ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ). Additionally, acceptance was significantly negatively related to negative affect ( $r = -.58, p < .01$ ). Thus, Hypotheses 1 and Hypotheses 2a and 2b were supported.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
1.Acceptance	4.54	.98	-					
2.Negative affect	2.05	.75	-.58**	-				
3.Positive affect	3.04	.76	.14*	.09	-			
4.Work engagement	4.83	.97	.23**	-.19**	.59**	-		
5.Vigor	4.67	1.08	.21**	-.22**	.50**	.89**	-	
6.Dedication	4.82	1.15	.20**	-.15**	.56**	.91**	.71**	-
7.Absorption	4.99	1.02	.19**	-.13*	.52**	.88**	.67**	.70**

*N* = 337.

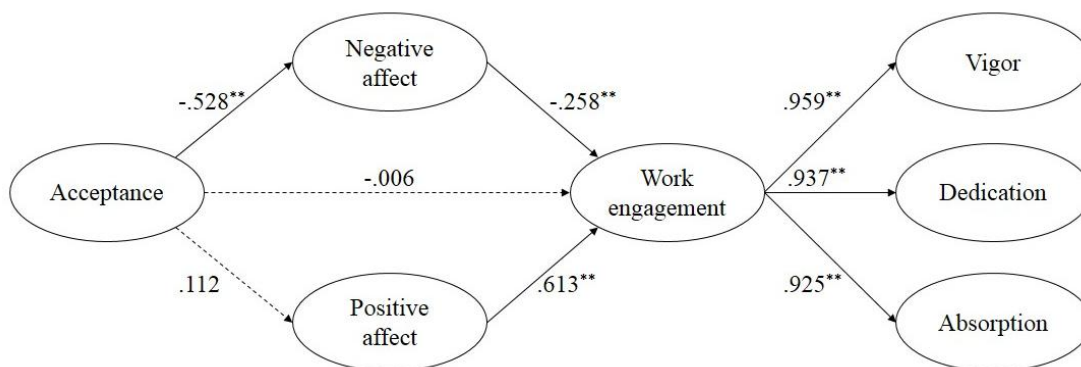
\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed test).



### 4.3 Mediating effects of affect

A structural equation model of employees' acceptance and work engagement was constructed to check the fitness of models and the significance of each path (see Figure 1). We examined the indirect effects by the bootstrapping procedure, and we could infer that there was a mediating effect when the 95% confidence interval (CI) did not include zero.

The results for the model indicated the model was acceptable ( $\chi^2/df = 2.49$ , CFI = .87, TLI = .86, RMSEA = .066, SRMR = .155). Consistent with Hypothesis 3a, the indirect effect of negative affect on the relationship between acceptance and work engagement was significant, and the 95% CI was [0.070, 0.202]. Contrary to Hypothesis 3b, the indirect effect of positive affect was not significant (95% CI = [-0.013, 0.151]). The direct effect of acceptance on work engagement was not significant, and the 95% CI was [-0.180, 0.158] (see Table 2). Therefore, Hypotheses 3a was supported, and negative affect played a completely mediating role in the relation between acceptance and work engagement.



**Figure 1:** The mediating effect of affect on the relationship between acceptance and work engagement.  $N = 337$ . \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed test).

**Table 2.** Indirect Effects and Bootstrap Results for the Mediating Effect of Negative Affect in Relationship Between Acceptance and Work Engagement.

Path	Standardized coefficient	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Acceptance → Work engagement	-0.006	-0.180	0.158
Acceptance → Negative affect → Work engagement	0.136	0.070	0.202
Acceptance → Positive affect → Work engagement	0.069	-0.013	0.151

## 5. DISSCUSSION

In the present study, we used a sample of full-time Chinese employees and attempted to uncover what role affect played in the relationship between acceptance and work engagement. The results support that acceptance is related to work engagement and that negative affect is a mediator in this relationship.

The results supported part of our assumptions. First, acceptance was positively related to work engagement, which was consistent with the JD-R model. We identified acceptance as an important and useful personal resource, which helped employees transfer their scarce and attentional resources from controlling affective experiences to goal attainment and concentration on job tasks.

We also found that acceptance affected work engagement via negative affect, which was consistent with AET theory. Prior studies have proposed that acceptance has three benefits: (a) it helps individuals rapidly rid themselves of negative affect, (b) it saves resources which are used to regulate unwanted affect, and (c) it helps individuals stay focused on goals or tasks in meeting set-backs or negative affect. The present study's results supported all three benefits of acceptance.



Additionally, the result showed that positive affect did not play a mediating role in the relationship between acceptance and work engagement, which was consistent with the work of Ford et al (2017). Results suggested that positive affect is an important predictor for work engagement but that acceptance may not a good helper for maintaining or increasing the experience of positive affect. Therefore, we could infer that acceptance is more effective for eliminating the effects of negative affect. As for the effects of acceptance on positive affect, more discussion is needed on this subject in the future.

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

The most important theoretical contribution made by the present study is the examination of the mediating effect of negative affect. Although past research has claimed that negative affect plays a critical role in determining employees' well-being, empirical studies about its' effect on work engagement have been rare. We found that acceptance is an antecedent of work engagement and that this relationship was mediated by negative affect. We also found that acceptance has a different effect on negative affect and positive affect, which supported a two-dimensional structure consisting of positive and negative affect (Feldman, Barrett & Russell, 1998), and we proposed an interesting question about the acceptance–affect relationship.

### 5.2 Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, the present study provides some suggestions for enterprise managers and individuals. Acceptance is a vital part of ACT, and its effect on stress management interventions has been well documented (Stafford-Brown et al., 2012). Managers and HR specialists can introduce training to their employees that is helpful for their emotional and personal effectiveness. Furthermore, employees could do some mindful practice, which is good for non-judging thinking styles.

### 5.3 Limitations and future research

Despite the fact that the present study found some notable results, there are still some limitations. First, the present study used self-reported surveys to collect data, which had a risk of common method bias. And self-rated work engagement may lead to socially desirable responds, resulting in decreased credibility of results. For a future study, we recommend that researchers apply others-rating work engagement or collect data from a range of sources.

Secondly, we conducted a cross-sectional study, which makes it insufficient to establish causality. In addition, affective experiences and work engagement fluctuate with time. Future research will benefit from considering a longitudinal design, a laboratory study, or a diary study to examine the causal relationship between acceptance and work engagement.

Thirdly, the present study focused on the effect of personal resource (i.e., acceptance) on work engagement, and we ignored the buffering effect of job resources. Thus, researchers could test the role of job resources in this relationship and compare which kinds of resources contribute more in the follow-up study.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the result of the study shows that there is a significant mediating effect of negative affect in the relationship between acceptance and work engagement among Chinese employees. Therefore, it is important to increase the level of acceptance to improving Chinese employees' work engagement.

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