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**Examining perceptions towards work engagement and employees' feelings of work engagement: A study among private and public Universities in Nigeria**

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**Purpose:** – This paper examined employees’ perception towards work engagement and how it relates to employees’ feelings of engagement at work. Studies such as Rigg, Sydnor, Nicely, and Day, (2014) as well as Sharma, Goel, and Sengupta, (2017) raised novel discussions about how work engagement with respect to individual factors such as perception could be influential in the organisation. The study perspective outlines major research questions such as ‘How does employees’ perception of work engagement relate to employees feeling of engagement at work?’ What is the nature of employees’ perception of work engagement? Thirdly, what are the identified factors that hinders and drives work engagement in Nigeria’s public and private universities? More so, the study examined work engagement levels between University employees.

**The concept of Employee engagement:** - Employee engagement is a variable that attempts to describe employees’ involvement, commitment and attachment to the workplace. Pioneer contributions to the emergence of work engagement is traceable to Kahn (1990). According to Khan (1990) employee engagement describes a link between employees and their work roles, where employees express and connect physically, cognitively, and emotionally with their work roles. Employee engagement has been described as an elusive concept with three dimensions, i.e. vigour, dedication, and absorption (Bedarkar and Pandita, 2014). Research views on employee engagement suggest that it encompasses related concepts such as job commitment, satisfaction etc. (Sharma et al., 2017). Studies such as Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina, 2002; Hewitt Associates, 2004; Czarnowsky, 2008; Markos and Sridevi, 2010; AonHewitt, 2013) revealed that businesses with engaged employees would perform better, while Gallup (2013) discovered that engaged employees could be more productive, loyal, committed and innovative. Shucks et al., (2011) revealed that disengaged employees cost economies a lot; evidence from Germany, Australia, and Asia are estimated at \$263, \$4.9, and \$2.9 billion respectively. Similarly, literature suggests that employee engagement is positively related to

overall organisational performance; Studies such as Kumar and Pansari 2016; Zelles 2015) explained that work engagement may either interact with other variables or function directly to impact organisational performance.

On the other hand, work engagement studies in Africa have been barely investigated, for example in Nigeria, work engagement studies have focused more on the effects of engagement rather than how the concept influences employees and the work setting (Nwinyokpugi, 2015; Ikon and Chukwu, 2017). Over the years, studies have progressively proven that a person's idea and opinion could impact his or her understanding of the external world (Aarts, Dijksterhuis, & De Vries, 2001). While the organisation has a duty to advance work engagement which occurs through a two-way tie between the employer and the employee. Employee perceptions of work engagement becomes a gauge that could explain connections between employees feeling of engagement and their eventual performance at work. Recent search through literature on the link between employee perception of work engagement and employees feeling of being engaged showed that it has been scarcely investigated. Therefore, this investigation examines the relationship between employee perceptions towards work engagement and their feeling of being engaged. Hence, perception is discussed as a variable that can affect employees feeling of work engagement, rather than analysing how these perceptions develops.

**Theoretical foundations:** - Studies on work engagement have recognised numerous models as suitable for explaining and understanding the engagement concept. According to Miles (2012), there is no unique theoretical explanation for employee engagement, however, different frameworks explains aspects of the concept. Models such as role theory, expectancy theory, and Job demand-resource (JDR) model are often offered as logical explanation of the concept. While these models express their viewpoints, the JDR model developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2001) emphasise an equilibrium between available job resources and the

continuous demands associated with the job. Hence, the JDR model appears to be most relevant in this investigation.

The JDR model refer to a two-way pathway to realising high work engagement, i.e. job demands (JD) and job resources (JR) (Bakker and Demerouti, 2001). Job Demand represents physical, social, and psychological roles that requires a continuous physical or mental capability (Demerouti et al., 2014). Job resources comprise of social support, feedback on performance, skill variety, and autonomy to start a motivational process that consequently leads to higher performance (Hakanen et al., 2006). Demerouti et al., (2014) identified vigour, readiness to work, dedication, and absorption as components of work engagement. Hakanen et al., (2006) suggested that Job demand and resource could support employee development especially in job factors such as job autonomy, social support, performance feedback, job security and a supportive organizational climate (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008).

**Design/methodology/approach:** - This research employs a mixed method approach, it combines the use of a work engagement measure and semi-structured interview. Dainty (2008) noted the need for methodological pluralism in social and management research. This is because a singular approach may be inadequate to explain subjective and objective factors in a research. The study conducted a pilot study where 10 employees were interviewed, 5 from a private university (Lead City University, LCU) and another 5 from a public University in Nigeria (University of Ibadan, UI). Also, 107 employees i.e. 41 and 66 employees from LCU and UI respectively responding to the scale measuring employees feeling of engagement at work. Respondents to the scale were selected based on staff strength and size of the institutions. The study adopted a purposive sampling technique which was based on employees meeting the different criteria of the study. There are no main data selection criteria for this study, employees were approached randomly based on their work roles which is academic and non-academic.

The study compared results from academic and non-academic employees and largely between the two organisations.

The Utrecht Work engagement scale (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli et al., (2006) was employed to gather responses on feelings of engagement at work, while semi structured interview reported perceptions of employees on their work engagements. As part of the study design, an adapted pre-test post-test design was used to examine employees understanding of engagement at work and how it relates to their feeling of work engagement. The pre and post-test design allows for a test and retests of participants' feelings of work engagement after they are enlightened about what it means to be engaged at work. Data collected during the pilot study was analysed using SPSS to compare responses from the UWES-9, while interviews were analysed using NVIVO. The use of SPSS and NVIVO present a robust account that offers both subjective and objective explanation of the findings.

**Findings:** - Findings from interview transcripts and responses from UWES-9. Firstly, descriptive statistics of mean scores of examined demographic variables such as gender, academic qualifications, and staff type (academic and non-academic) were presented. Mean scores of genders revealed that male employees were higher than females on scores of engagement at work with (43.2800) for males and (38.8125) for females. Also, mean scores of academic qualification, showed that scores were reflective of qualifications, e.g. employees with PhD degree scored higher on engagement with (45.1053), followed by M.Sc. (41.2813), B.Sc. (39.0953), which illustrates that employees' engagement can be a function of academic qualification. Furthermore, comparison was made between academic and non-academic employees. Generally, academic employees appeared higher on work engagement than non-academic employees; also, private employees scored higher on engagement (43.0750) than public employees (41.1940). Further analysis from the pre-test and post-test design which attempted to explain employee's engagement levels due to information and discussions on

work engagement practices. This was designed to examine if perceived feeling of work engagement would change based on enlightenment about work engagement. Result showed increased level of engagement for employees in Lead City University as against a decrease in engagement scores for University of Ibadan. Mean score for UI at (37.7) was lower than LCU's (45.3). A post hoc test was used to examine differences in all scores, academic staff of both organisations i.e. U.I and LCU had the only significant result at (0.01) level of significance with a result of (0.007).

More results from interview data with NVIVO showed that generally employees' perceptions i.e. public and private were similarly negative across both institutions and several barriers such as lack of communication, low pay, and a lack of information, inadequate training, and inadequate infrastructure were identified. Additionally, more negative views to work engagement were recorded with employees of LCU (private) and subjects such as irregular payment of workers salary, work overload, power outage, job insecurity, lack of information and subsequent detachment from the university's higher echelon, no support from the organisation amongst others were noted as major concerns.

**Discussion:** - Result from UWES-9 starting with demographic parameters such as gender showed that male employees felt more engaged than females. Furthermore, Employees of private organisation felt more engaged than public employees. However, employees of private organisation scored more on absorption which suggests high work overloads in the private institution. This finding is evident in private employees' complaints about work overloads during their interviews. The overall low score on work engagement by public workers can be traceable to the nature of the public work structure in Nigeria, this was also mentioned in studies such as Nwinyokpugi, (2015) and Ikon and Chukwu, (2017). Further findings among public employees signified low attitude to work characterised by a nonchalant and laidback attitude to work. More significantly, academic employees in both public and private sectors

felt high engagement than non-academic employees. The study found a connection between employees' academic qualifications and a high feeling of work engagement as result from higher qualification holders such as Ph.D. showed higher work engagement. This signifies that higher qualifications could influence higher work engagement. This finding on academic qualification and comparisons between academic and non-academic employees suggests an important link between qualification and employee engagement levels. It appears those with higher academic qualification had more knowledge and understanding of work processes, practices and functioning of the organisation; findings which is consistent with the findings of Nwinyokpugi, (2015); Ikon & Chukwu, (2017).

Interview result provided answers to the nature of employees' perception towards their work engagement, revealing a negative perception towards work engagement in these institutions. More so, private organisation appeared higher in negative perceptions as more factors such as irregular payment of salary, work overload, power outages, job insecurity, lack of information and subsequent detachment from the university higher echelon, no support from the organisation amongst others were additionally noted as factors impairing their engagement at work. General study results showed that negative perception may not necessarily influence employees' feelings of engagement at work. It is therefore worthy to note that although employees from private institutions in this study showed more negative perceptions towards their engagements at work in interviews, they still scored higher on their feelings of engagement at work. Drawing from the JDR model by Bakker and Demerouti (2001), negative perceptions shared by employees reflects inadequate resources and a high demand which obviously resulted in complaints about work overloads in the study.

**Conclusion:-** Findings from this study explains the link between employee perception of work engagement and the feeling of being engaged by suggesting a negative link, it also reinforce the works of Garg, (2014) and Rigg, et al., (2014) where it was noted that however crucial

engagement at work appears to be, it may not always be positively inclined. Secondly, the nature of employee's perception towards engagement as clearly shown in this study is seen as either being positive and negative. More so, negative perceptions are mostly driven by inadequate job resources described in the JDR model creates a disequilibrium when employees are executing their job roles. More so, the study identified factors that hinders and drives work engagement especially among Nigeria's public and private Universities. Lastly, findings revealed that employee level of work engagement could be a factor of their understanding and qualification.

**Limitations of the study:** - The study witnessed limitations which are obvious being a pilot study, an increase in the number of respondents would have enhanced the presentation of a more detailed data. More so, strike actions in the Nigerian sector impaired the data collection process of the study.

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## Appendix

### Descriptive statistics

Table 1. Gender; a frequency distribution of responses between males and females.

Gender
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		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	40	37.4	37.4	37.4
	Male	67	62.6	62.6	100.0
	Total	107	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Academic qualification; a frequency table showing distribution of responses between various academic qualifications.

Academic Qualifications					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	B.Sc.	27	25.2	25.2	25.2
	MSc	44	41.1	41.1	66.4
	PhD	25	23.4	23.4	89.7
	Others (ND,HND,NCE,S SCE)	11	10.3	10.3	100.0
	Total	107	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. Academic and non-academic staff; a frequency table showing responses between academic and non-academic employees and a general display for UI and LCI.

Public and Private academic and non-academics					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cum Percent
Valid	Nonacademic public	37	34.6	34.6	34.6
	academic public	29	27.1	27.1	61.7
	nonacademic private	11	10.3	10.3	72.0
	academic private	30	28.0	28.0	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	107	100.0	100.0	
Academic and non-academic combined together for UI and LCI					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cum Percent
Valid	non academic	48	44.9	44.9	44.9
	academic	59	55.1	55.1	100.0
	<b>Total</b>	107	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Mean scores for responses between private and public

Group Statistics					
	School	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Work-engagement overall score	private	41	43.0750	4.44561	.70291
	public	66	41.1940	7.66582	.93653
Vigor	private	41	14.5500	2.43847	.38556
	public	66	13.4627	3.65699	.44677
Dedication	private	41	16.2000	2.10250	.33243
	public	66	15.5672	2.98595	.36479
Absorption	private	41	12.3250	2.22327	.35153
	public	66	12.1642	2.79933	.34199

Table 5. Mean scores for responses between academic and non-academic staff

Group Statistics					
	Academic2	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Overall engagement score	non academic	48	41.0000	6.30096	.90947
	academic	59	42.6271	6.95031	.90485
Vigor	non academic	48	13.1875	3.34318	.48255
	academic	59	14.4237	3.15793	.41113
Dedication	non academic	48	15.7917	2.43169	.35098
	academic	59	15.8136	2.91533	.37954
Absorption	non academic	48	12.0208	2.56399	.37008
	academic	59	12.3898	2.61967	.34105

Table 6: Mean scores for responses between males and females

Descriptive Statistics
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Pre/post test	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Work engagement pre-test	Female	38.8125	7.31079	32
	Male	43.2800	6.02728	50
	Total	41.5366	6.87309	82
Work engagement post-test	Female	38.4375	9.43206	32
	Male	41.0000	7.55659	50
	Total	40.0000	8.37692	82

Table 7: Mean scores for responses between Academic qualification

Descriptive Statistics				
	AcadaQuali2	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Work engagement pre-test	B.Sc.	39.0952	9.00503	21
	MSc	41.2813	5.71492	32
	PhD	45.1053	4.38298	19
	others	40.7000	7.22726	10
	Total	41.5366	6.87309	82
Work engagement post-test	B.Sc.	37.6667	10.54672	21
	MSc	40.4063	7.81586	32
	PhD	43.1579	5.49002	19
	others	37.6000	8.54010	10
	Total	40.0000	8.37692	82

Pre-test and post-test results

Mean scores for pre and post test				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	N
	Academics Public	40.0833	8.68741	24

Work Engagement pre-test	Non Academic Public	40.8485	7.01392	33
	Academic Private	44.6500	3.13344	20
	Non Academic Private	40.6000	4.03733	5
	Total	41.5366	6.87309	82
Work Engagement post test	Academics Public	36.1250	8.01798	24
	Non Academic Public	38.7879	9.04419	33
	Academic Private	45.3500	4.61434	20
	Non Academic Private	45.2000	4.08656	5
	Total	40.0000	8.37692	82

Table showing differences between academic and non-academic employees of private and public

Bonferroni						
(I) public & private	(J) public & private	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Academics Public	Non Academic Public	-1.7140	1.82029	1.000	-6.6419	3.2139
	Academic Private	-6.8958*	2.05434	<b>.007</b>	-12.4574	-1.3343
	Non Academic Private	-4.7958	3.33561	.927	-13.8260	4.2344
Non Academic Public	Academics Public	1.7140	1.82029	1.000	-3.2139	6.6419
	Academic Private	-5.1818	1.92279	.052	-10.3872	.0236
	Non Academic Private	-3.0818	3.25624	1.000	-11.8971	5.7335
Academic Private	Academics Public	6.8958*	2.05434	<b>.007</b>	1.3343	12.4574
	Non Academic Public	5.1818	1.92279	.052	-.0236	10.3872
	Non Academic Private	2.1000	3.39263	1.000	-7.0846	11.2846
Non Academic Private	Academics Public	4.7958	3.33561	.927	-4.2344	13.8260
	Non Academic Public	3.0818	3.25624	1.000	-5.7335	11.8971
	Academic Private	-2.1000	3.39263	1.000	-11.2846	7.0846
Based on observed means.						
The error term is Mean Square (Error) = 46.040.						
*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.						

Overall mean scores for University of Ibadan (UI) Lead City University's pre and post test scores.

**Private organisation(Lead City University)**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Work engagement pre-test	43.8400	25	3.63639	.72728
Work engagement post-test	45.3200	25	4.43208	.88642

**Public Organisation (University of Ibadan)**

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Work engagement pre-test	40.5263	57	7.69765	1.01958
Work engagement post-test	37.6667	57	8.65475	1.14635

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

**Tests of Between-Subjects Effects**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	254555.521	1	254555.521	2590.224	.000	.970
Gender	482.155	1	482.155	4.906	.030	.058
Error	7862.040	80	98.276			

Appendix 2  
Result from NVIVO



