

# Gender Influences on Emotional Self-Regulation among Malaysian Academicians

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**Abstract**—The Malaysian government aspires to become a leading international education hub, and inline with the aspiration, the Ministry of Higher Education introduced the key performance indicators for the academicians. This resulted in the emergence of a new academic excellence norm which focused on the scholarship. This interpretive study explored the gender influences on emotional self-regulation among the academicians in Malaysia. The study also described the emotional self-regulation strategies taken by the academicians in coping with the challenges of a new academic norm. This study employed a mixed methods approach with grounded theory as the dominant qualitative approach followed by a survey. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and a total of 24 professors were interviewed over the period of nine months. An on-line survey was conducted and 595 academicians responded. Findings discovered that academicians self-regulated their emotions through motivating own self, staying focus to achieve personal target, evaluating own self, distinguishing self needs and accepting others' differences in coping with the lack of working environment support. Through the survey, gender is correlated with emotional self-regulation with female having a higher emotional self-regulation.

**Index Terms**—Emotional Self-Regulation, Grounded Theory, Malaysian Academicians, Interpretive Research.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning have long been connected with the production of knowledge. The creation and dissemination of knowledge had long been the social role of institutions of higher learning [1]. In the knowledge era, higher learning institutions expanded their scope of activities in the creation and dissemination of knowledge to include teaching in preparing students to become life-long learners, research to expand human knowledge and creativity and service to universities, local, national and international community [2].

In the context of Malaysia, the government is concentrating on transformation of Malaysian higher learning into an excellent international learning hub. Ministry of Higher Education has outlined the performance indicators for the academicians consist of teaching, research, publication, writing, public service, consultancy, and

management. The introduction of the key performance indicators resulted in the new academic norm, which required a paradigm shift among the academicians. The new academic norm brings along new challenges to the academicians.

Emotional intelligence is the key determinant to professional success [3]. Academicians are no different, successful academicians are those who can embrace the continuously shifting emotional dimensions in coping with the pressures of academic life [4]. There are limited studies on the influences of gender on emotional self-regulation. Studies have found that women tend to have higher emotional regulation as they scored higher in EI than men [5][6]. It was also found that female managers have more skills in managing the emotions of themselves and others [7]. Women also scored significantly higher than men in the social skills aspects which contribute to better emotional regulation [8].

The purpose of this study are:

- 1) To describe how successful Malaysian academicians self-regulate their emotions in coping with the new academic norm.
- 2) To explore how gender contributes towards emotional self-regulation among the Malaysian academicians.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional self-regulation is also known by the term emotional regulation. It refers to one's ability to regulate emotions to suit proper place, time or situation. It involves initiating, stopping or adjusting internal emotions, thoughts, physiological reactions and behavioral reactions. Self-regulation of behavior generally refers to conscious cognitive monitoring of actions and steps that are required to achieve one's goal, or to gain the desired result from the environment [9]. Research on self-regulation in adults showed that negative emotional experience can lead to poor attention, poor engagement and impulsivity, and more negative effect, whereas positive emotional experience can increase levels of sustained attention, engagement, and persistence [10].

Emotional regulation suggests that an individual should possess an objective self-awareness [11]. When one focuses attention on the self, this will initiate an automatic comparison process where the self is viewed against relevant standard [12]. If the self and standards are perceived as not at par, the individual will generally try to reduce the discrepancy by working putting efforts to meet the targeted standard. However, in some situation, the reaction is to avoid

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the standard altogether [13], make up some excuses to protect the self, or change the standard so that instead it is tailored to suit the self [14]. Employees who underwent training on mindful training (teaching how to regulate thoughts before reacting emotionally) reported less stress and felt more creative and enthusiastic about their job [15]. It was also found that emotional regulation assists people in achieving goals by managing dysfunctional emotional experiences [16].

Therefore, self-regulation in the workplace can be the deliberate adjustment of one's physical, mental, and emotional state to fit the circumstances of the moment or to meet the demands of work. In reaction to work demand one may put in more hours to meet datelines, attend courses to improve oneself, or seek resources to complete tasks. Another way of reacting to frustrations at work may be to positively think about the situation, ignore the source of stress, or use medications / drugs to manage the physiological arousal. Those who succumb to the tension may well be affected by psychosomatic illness such as persistent headaches, heart problems or gastric problems.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The paradigm of this study is interpretivist, it assumes that reality at relative and subjective meaning of the reality is constructed and reconstructed through human and social interaction process [17]. Epistemologically, this paradigm assumes that scientific knowledge is obtained through understanding of human and social interactions. An interpretivist researcher aims to understand a phenomenon through meanings that people assign to them.

The study employed the mixed method approach using the sequential exploratory strategy in data collecting and analysis. Mixed methods approach has many advantages, among which is it enables researcher to capture many dimensions of an information systems research [18]. Reference [19] and [20] adopted pluralist approaches in their studies concluded that it is a valid and highly useful approach in information systems research. The initial and dominant approach is the qualitative approach followed by the quantitative approach. Quantitative results are used to elaborate and enhancement the interpretation of qualitative findings.

#### A. The Grounded Theory Approach

Data are collected during a period of nine months. The case site is one of the premier public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, with three satellite campuses, fourteen branch campuses and eight city campuses. It has 25 faculties and offered over 200 academic programs spreading over science and technology, social science, humanities and business management. The participants are selected among the professors because they are recognized experts and scholars in the highest rank within academic environment. To ensure that a broad spectrum of professors is represented, the selection of participants includes different clusters of academic programs and experiences in teaching, research

and services are considered to ensure that the success of understanding the process of emotional self-regulation among the Malaysian academicians.

In congruence with the GT methodology, semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted which lasted between fifty to ninety minutes, in private and mutually agreed location and time. Participants are asked to recall specific situations or incidents in their professional life that shaped their understanding, perception, views and behavior as a scholar. Among the issues discussed during the interviews are the actions taken to overcome or handle situations and the underlying reasons for their actions. They are also asked to elaborate on the critical elements that contributed to their success or failure in their career. Interview protocol is developed to ensure consistencies throughout data collection. Interviews are tape-recorded to ensure all the details were captured. In minimizing the tape-recording drawbacks, assurance of the confidentiality on the issues discussed is made before the interview. The validation process is done immediately after the interviews ended by paraphrasing the information collected into incident, actions and reasons.

Theoretical sampling guides the process of selecting participants and directs the data collection process. A total of 24 academicians are interviewed, comprising of 5 females and 19 males. In terms of their academic discipline, there are 5 participants from the medical school, 4 participants are from the engineering disciplines, and another 15 are from business management, arts, pharmacy, sciences and others. All interviews are transcribed verbatim after each interview by the researcher. Data is analyzed and coded based on the GT methodology. Three levels of coding are performed starting with open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Initially during the open coding, the researcher started with sentence by sentence analysis but later changed the strategy into analyzing segments of the interviews because most of the time, the main idea is embedded in a story which requires more than a sentence to elaborate. To overcome the difficulty in assigning the code words to sections of interviews that identified pertinent concepts, the researcher relied on theoretical memos for clarity on ideas. Paradigm modeling, an analytical tool used to identify the key themes and cluster them into broad themes which eventually summarizing and categorizing the emerging strategy in a structured form of causal condition→phenomenon→context→intervening condition→action strategies →consequences [8] assisted the researcher in the analysis phase.

#### B. The Survey

The questionnaire for the survey consists of 5 scenarios representing the 5 emotional self-regulation strategies discovered from the grounded theory analysis. Scenarios generated for this research are gathered from the critical incidences related by the respondents. All critical incidences are gathered during the interview process, which are sorted out to identify duplicate or near duplicate critical incidences and later grouped according

to their themes. Emotional self-regulation is one of the themes which consists of 5 critical incidences. Once the scenarios were written, the item responses are generated by referring back to the findings from the interviews. Actions taken by the participants in the critical incidences were listed as the responses to the respective scenarios. Each scenario is accompanied by 4 to 6 response options. Scoring involves the process of determining the right answer to build a scoring key. The study is based on the premise that successful academicians (experts) possess a higher degree of emotional self-regulation, thus it is appropriate to base the scoring keys on the experts' answer.

A pilot study is conducted and the pilot survey instrument consists of four sections; the demographic section, the scenario mediated test, the overall comments section and the quality-rating section. The objective of the demographic section is two-fold, the first one is to obtain necessary information of the respondents in terms of their demography, and the other one is to obtain the information on their academic experiences. The scenario-mediated test serves as the tool in extracting the emotional self-regulation strategies of the respondent. To gather feedback from the respondents, each item or scenario has the option of "others", where respondents fill up options not provided in the question. Besides that, the respondents provide feedback and evaluation of the scenarios instrument through the overall comments and quality-rating sections. In the pilot survey, respondents were asked to provide feedbacks on the questionnaires and to rate the 5 scenarios for their perceived presence at the PIHL. To gather the feedbacks, an open-ended section is included in the questionnaire. For the rating of the scenarios, a Likert scale of 1 to 5 was used where 1 represented the "not true at all" and 5 represented the "very true". Respondents consisted of academic staff of several PIHL. 62 out of 100 respondents returned their survey forms, representing 62% of the total. 30 of them are Professors and the other 32 are non-professors. The analysis of the survey consists of two types of feedback, the overall comments and the average ratings of the scenarios developed.

More than half (55%) of the respondents commented that the response options were very challenging to choose. Although answering the questionnaire was challenging, the respondents viewed that the scenarios were comprehensive and interesting. Some respondents also were able to associate the construct measured with the scenarios. Around thirty percent (30%) reflected that experience is needed in answering the scenarios. Analysis on the data shows that respondents rated the scenarios and the response options above the average. The standard deviations are small, ranging from an average of 0.8 to 1.25. As for the quality of the scenarios, the average ratings vary from as 3.07 to a respectable 3.92.

Data collection for the study is done through an on-line survey. A cover letter, the questionnaire and supporting documents were e-mailed to 20,831 academicians in 20 public higher learning institutions in Malaysia. The e-mail listing was downloaded from the directory of expertise on the Ministry of Higher Education website. The total number of

respondents are 595, with 94 professors and 501 academicians responded to the survey over the period of 10 months.

#### IV. FINDINGS

After conducting 24 interviews, it is discovered that academicians strategized by self-regulating their emotions. Five emotional self-regulation strategies emerged and six contextual factors are discovered to contribute towards the emotional self-regulation. Five emotional self-regulation strategies are motivating own self, staying focus to achieve personal target, evaluating own self, accepting others' differences, and distinguishing self needs. Table 1 shows the actions taken by the academicians which made up the five emotional self-regulation strategies.

	<b>EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION</b>	<b>ACTION STRATEGIES</b>
1.	Motivating own self	a. Emulate oneself after a successful academician. b. Set goals for personal achievements. c. Bear in mind the contributions that can be made from the intellectual work. d. Treat academic work as intellectual curiosity. e. Keep in mind your underlying motivation/reason for performing the task.
2.	Staying focus to achieve personal target	a. Adjust working habits to achieve goal. b. Create a state of urgency in pursuit of goal. c. Surpass own self by working extra time, double the effort. d. Balance emotions in handling pressure. e. Treat obstacles as a positive stimulation.
3.	Evaluating own self	a. Do daily self-reflection to check on accomplishments of the day. b. Plan tasks to be done early in the day to ensure things are done. c. Set priorities based on your own strength and weakness. d. Evaluate your own work critically. e. Have a standard of rigor in everything you

		do.
4.	Accepting others' differences	<p>a. Accept differences in dealing with other members including the seniors.</p> <p>b. Avoid challenging the others' culture unless you are worth your words.</p> <p>c. Make decision through consensus.</p> <p>d. Reserve criticism unless you have a better alternative.</p> <p>e. Pay attention to how rather than what is to be presented.</p> <p>f. Know when to raise disagreement with the seniors.</p>
5.	Distinguishing self needs	<p>a. Set priorities based on your own passion and needs.</p> <p>b. Be proactive to make something happen regardless of the importance of the task.</p> <p>c. Take up responsibility beyond work requirement.</p> <p>d. Be honest when doing evaluation on issues regardless of the people involved.</p> <p>e. Pursue intellectual aspiration for the purpose of self-actualization.</p>

The six factors are age, length of service, gender, designation, field of expertise and qualification. However, this paper focuses the discussion only on gender and how it influences emotional self-regulation among the academicians.

Gender is the factor elaborated by R016 when she describes, "From the way I see it, woman in academic institutions are always the second class citizen, have to work harder due to the multiple priorities." R021 stresses the same

sentiment when she said, "I have to make sure that the planning must be done early because I have responsibilities not only at work but also at home....for me as much as you look forward to come to work, you must also look forward to go home...."

Findings from the survey shows that a total of 90 professors and 501 non-professors responded to the questionnaire sent to them. Among the professors, 68 or 75.6% are male and only 22 or 24.4% are females. Among the non-professors, 208 or 41.5% are male lecturers while 293 or 58.5% lecturers are females. Emotional self-regulation is measured between male and female academicians.

A significant difference is found in the emotional self-regulation between male and female respondents,  $t(589) = 2.410, p=.016$  (refer to Table 2). The means show that female respondents have higher score ( $M=3.28, SD=2.52$ ) of emotional self-regulation compared to male respondents ( $M=2.78, SD=2.53$ ).

#### V. CONCLUSION

The present findings give insights on how successful academicians self-regulate their emotions in facing with challenges in a new academic norm. Academicians self-regulate their emotions in acting befitting the image of an excellent academician. Gender influences the emotional self-regulation of the academicians. Female academicians have a higher level of emotional self-regulation as compared with the male counterparts. Cross-references with the qualitative data reflected that female academicians' role and responsibilities extended into two different context, work and personal. This is supported by [21] who did a study on gender influences on emotional intelligence (EI) which found that women display higher levels of EI competencies at home, than men did at work. It is discovered that the academicians' emotional self-regulation correspond to their goals and values. The actions that they perform are guided by their values and norms and also the intended results and effects. Theoretically, the study contributes towards the understanding on gender influences on emotional self-regulation. The identified emotional self-regulation provides insights into the practical abilities associated to the success of an academician. The insights assist in promoting effectiveness of an academician, accelerating the knowledge acquisition and facilitating the transition from novice to expert academician.

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TABLE 2. Gender and Emotional Self-Regulation

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
self	Male	276	2.7754	2.5256	2.410	589	.016
	Female	315	3.2762	2.5155			