

Does Self-efficacy Counteract the Effect of Perception of Internal Politics on Work Engagement? A Study of Academic Staff in Sri Lankan State Universities

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Abstract

Internal politics frequently interferes with routine organizational activities and has significant implications for a range of work-related outcomes. While research on the perception of internal politics has matured considerably in Western contexts, empirical evidence from developing countries remains limited, fragmented, and conceptually underdeveloped. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perception of organizational politics and its effect on work-related outcomes and the moderating role of the self-efficacy of the academic staff in Sri Lankan Universities. The relationship between organizational politics, self-efficacy and work engagement was examined with a sample of 350 academic staff in the state universities in Sri Lanka selected through a convenience sampling technique. Data analysis was mainly performed with a hierarchical regression analysis in order to assess the interaction effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between perception of internal politics and work engagement. The result reveals that self-efficacy counteracts the negative effect of the perception of internal politics on the work engagement of the staff. This finding demonstrates that the extent to which an individual's belief in his or her innate ability may have been a key component in lessening the possible effect of internal politics on their work performance. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of developing employees' self-efficacy through targeted training, mentoring, and supportive organizational practices, while theoretically underscoring the value of incorporating personal resources into models explaining the consequences of internal politics.

Keywords: *Academic staff, Perception of politics, Political behaviour, Self-efficacy, Work management.*

Introduction

Internal politics in organizations is simply a fact of life and personal experiences, hunches, and anecdotal evidence have supported the general belief that people's behavior in organizations is often political in nature (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). Many definitions of internal politics view it as workplace activities that can result in negative or destructive work outcomes (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). Theoretical evidences as well suggest that internal politics often interferes with routine organizational processes including decision making, promotion, and rewards that damage organization productivity (Landells & Albrecht, 2019; Guo et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2019; Murtaza et al., 2024; AL-Abrow, 2022; Ugwu et al., 2022; Mehmood et al., 2023; Nazir et al., 2024; Al-Madadha et al., 2021; Burakova et al., 2022; Ogwuche et al., 2024; Kaur, & Kang, 2023; Munyeka & Setati, 2022; Malik & Pichler, 2023; Park & Lee, 2020). Due to the political nature, the internal politics have received increasing attention from researchers. The research in this area has primarily focused on internal politics and its nature, characteristics and consequences on organizational outcomes. Studies have examined the effect of internal politics on job related outcomes, including job satisfaction, turnover intention, work engagement, work motivation, and innovative behavior (Ugwu et al., 2022; Mehmood et al., 2023; Nazir et al., 2024). Some studies found a negative relationship of internal politics to job related outcomes (Murtaza et al., 2024; AL-Abrow, 2022; Ugwu et al., 2022; Mehmood et al., 2023; Nazir et al., 2024; Al-Madadha et al., 2021; Burakova et al., 2022; Ogwuche et al., 2024; Kaur, & Kang, 2023; Munyeka & Setati, 2022; Malik & Pichler, 2023; Park & Lee, 2020). However, some scholars in opinion that internal politics would bring positive impacts to organizations. In fact, a strand of studies believed that the perception of organizational politics could improve work engagements in the context where when people realized the organizational politics, they would take some undertakings to avoid such situation and work with their full commitment (Eldor, 2017; Roopa et al., 2023; Yen et al., 2009; Opoku, & Arthur, 2018; Chukwuma, & Agbaeze, 2019; Chen et al., 2024; Turek, 2022; Tripathi, 2024). This condition indicates that empirical efforts to support the negative consequences of internal politics are yet to be inconclusive.

Moreover, some studies examined the moderating effects of several variables on the relationship between internal politics and job-related outcomes. Vigoda-Gadot and Talmud (2010) identified trust and social support as good moderators of the relationship between perceived organizational politics and job-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, stress, and burnout. Rong and Cao (2015) also state that perceived organizational support moderates the negative effect of perceived internal politics on employee organizational commitment.

Hassan et al. (2017) identified that extraversion and openness of the personality traits moderate the negative effect of perceived internal politics on job satisfaction. Murtaza et al. (2024) state that

mindfulness serves as a personal resource for mitigating the negative influence of perceived organizational politics on work outcomes. Park and Lee (2020) found public service motivation as a moderator on the relationship between organizational politics and work attitudes and performance. Although several moderators have been investigated in the empirical studies of the relationship between perceived internal politics and work outcomes, including work engagement (Imran et al., 2017; Landells et al., 2019), very few research has tested the moderator effect of self-efficacy, which could potentially control the influence of perceived internal politics on work engagement. Therefore, an empirical inquiry focusing on the relationship between the perception of internal politics and work engagement, as well as the moderating effect of self-efficacy, will enhance our current understanding of this phenomenon.

The internal politics in public sector organizations quite common throughout the world and Sri Lanka is no exception. To date, very few studies have examined the issues relating to the internal politics in public sector organizations in Sri Lanka (Robinson, 2016). In fact, no studies have been conducted to examine the internal politics and its consequences on the work-related outcomes of the academic staff in state universities where some higher administrative positions are elected among their membership (e.g. Dean of a Faculty). Although much advancement has been made in this area, university teaching staff have been neglected, which is important to know, given its vital role in society. Universities are responsible for the change in society and for preparing professionals. As universities have charismatic leadership and a higher class of wisdom and vision, so expectations from them are also high. Moreover, universities have always been conceived as vital units contributing to various sectors of development and growth through intellectual input. Academic staff is a key force assumed to contribute to the span of knowledge that is substantial for the improvement of society and the growth of the economy. Thus, the current study aims to explore the individual perception about the internal politics and its effect on work-related outcomes of the academic staff in the state universities in Sri Lanka. The study also examines the moderating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between perception of internal politics and work engagement.

This study contributes to internal political literature in several ways. First, this is the foremost study that focuses academic staff of the Sri Lankan universities to examine their perception of internal politics and its effect on work engagement. The study also directed its survey to all the permanent academic staff in the Sri Lankan university system in order to obtain robust results and generalizable findings. Moreover, findings of the study put forward managerial and policy implications for universities and relevant administrations.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Perception of Internal Politics

Organizational politics is generally defined as behavior that is strategically formed to maximize self-interest of individuals or groups (Ferris et al., 2013). One of the earliest descriptions of organizational

politics in the literature is from Mintzberg (1983). He defined organization politics as *“individual or group behavior that is informal, ostensibly parochial, typically divisive, and above all in a technical sense, illegitimate sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise (although it may exploit any one of these).”* Such behavior is promoted by the various constraints and limitations faced by today’s organization. Organizational politics, therefore, contradict the collective organizational efforts and interest of the stakeholders (Murtaza et al, 2024; AL-Abrow, 2022; Ugwu et al., 2022; Mehmood et al., 2023).

There is a common belief that political behavior can be defined by the nature of the act or by people's perceptions of what is political (Vredenburg & Maurer, 1984). This is consistent with Lewin's (1936) notion that people's attitudes and behaviors are determined mostly by their perceptions of reality and not reality per se. Studies have further pointed out organizational politics as an important antecedent of employees’ performance, both formal and informal (Adams et al., 2002; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Kacmar & Baron, 1999; O’Connor & Morrison, 2001; Valle & Perrewe, 2000; Murtaza et al., 2024; AL-Abrow, 2022; Ugwu et al., 2022; Mehmood et al., 2023).

The perception of organizational politics is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising three core dimensions: general political behavior (GPB), go along to get ahead (GAGA), and pay and promotion policies (PPP) (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997). Together, these dimensions capture how individuals interpret self-serving actions, passive compliance, and organizational systems as politically driven, shaping their overall perception of politics within the workplace.

General political behavior (GPB) refers to overt self-serving actions undertaken by individuals to secure valued outcomes. Prior research consistently suggests that GPB is more prevalent in organizational contexts characterized by ambiguity, weak formal structures, and inadequate rules and regulations (Drory & Romm, 1990; Ferris et al., 1989; Fandt & Ferris, 1990; Ferris & King, 1991; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991). In such environments, employees lack clear behavioral expectations, increasing reliance on subjective judgment and personal interpretation. Consequently, decision-making becomes vulnerable to political pressure, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and information asymmetry (Drory & Romm, 1990). More recent studies reaffirm that ambiguous governance structures continue to foster political maneuvering across organizational contexts (AL-Abrow, 2022; Mehmood et al., 2023; Murtaza et al., 2024; Ugwu et al., 2022).

In addition, competition for scarce organizational resources and positions further intensifies GPB. When individuals contest for influential roles, political behavior escalates as control over such positions enables access to valued and often limited resources (Kumar & Ghadially, 1989). Frost (1987) further argues that individuals who control critical, non-substitutable resources become focal points of political activity, reinforcing the notion that resource scarcity is a structural antecedent of organizational politics.

Collectively, these findings suggest that GPB is not merely a product of individual disposition but is deeply embedded in organizational systems marked by uncertainty and resource constraints.

Go along to get ahead (GAGA) represents a more covert form of political behavior, characterized by deliberate inaction or passive compliance to safeguard personal interests. The literature highlights a strong association between organizational politics and conflict, with political actions often threatening others' self-interests and thereby generating tension (Gandz & Murray, 1980; Mintzberg, 1985). However, rather than confronting such dynamics, some individuals strategically choose silence or conformity to avoid conflict, which paradoxically constitutes political behavior in itself (Drory & Romm, 1990; Frost, 1987). By refraining from resistance, these individuals reduce their perceived threat to dominant political actors and may gain acceptance or rewards for their non-interference (Mintzberg, 1985). Thus, GAGA reflects a rational survival strategy in politically charged environments, where neutrality serves as a mechanism for personal advancement.

Pay and promotion policies (PPP) capture the institutionalization of politics through organizational reward systems. Empirical evidence indicates that reward and promotion decisions often reinforce political behavior, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Ferris et al., 1989; Ferris & King, 1991; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991). Human resource policies may implicitly favor individuals who engage in influence tactics, while marginalizing those who avoid political involvement. Although decision makers may not consciously discriminate, the outcomes of such systems signal that political behavior is instrumental for success. This reinforcement mechanism normalizes political activity, embedding it within routine organizational practices. Moreover, observing politically active individuals being rewarded can motivate previously non-political employees to adopt similar behaviors in pursuit of equitable outcomes (Ferris et al., 1989; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991).

Overall, the literature suggests that perceptions of organizational politics emerge from an interplay between individual behavior, interpersonal dynamics, and organizational systems. GPB, GAGA, and PPP collectively illustrate how politics is both enacted by individuals and sustained by structural conditions, emphasizing the need to examine organizational politics as a systemic phenomenon rather than an isolated set of behaviors.

Perception of Internal Politics and Work Engagement

Even though work-related outcomes of perception of internal politics have been extensively studied, work engagement has not been a major focus of the empirical studies. Work engagement has been identified as a strong predictor of a range of work-related outcomes, including employee attitudes, behavior, and performance (Albrecht, 2010). Work engagement is defined as a positive and enjoyable psychological state relating to work (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Shaffer et al., 2011). According to Schaufeli et al. (2020), vigor, dedication and absorption are the main features of it. Engaged employees are

characterized by a high level of energy, enthusiasm, and active involvement in work (Elder & Vigoda-Gadot, 2016; Holman & Wall, 2002).

The association between perception of internal politics and work engagement can possibly be explained using the framework provided by the Job Demands-Resources theory (JD-R). JD-R theory suggests that work engagement plays a significant role on the relationship between job and resources and personal and organizational outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Crawford et al. (2010) provided evidence, through a meta-analysis of samples consisting of 3,042 participants, for a negative relationship between internal politics and work engagement.

Some studies show that employees perceived internal politics may believe that cliques and factions would threaten normal workflow and lead to psychological stress and anxiety (Cropanzano et al., 1997; Murtaza et al., 2024; AL-Abrow, 2022; Ugwu et al., 2022; Mehmood et al., 2023). As a result, such employees are not likely to put into work. Moreover, if employees believe policies and procedures are unfair and personally biased, they will not work with total dedication and are likely to become demotivated, reducing their work engagement.

According to principles of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), when employees perceive the organization as positive and favorable, they try to reciprocate through a favorable response. Empirical studies have also provided evidence to support the argument that a negative perception of internal politics may lead to an unfavorable or unfavorable response towards the organization, including decreased work engagement (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007; Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006; Bashir et al., 2011). Cropanzano et al., (1997) also suggest through their study that employees perceive higher internal politics tend to be less involved in their jobs. Even though very limited studies found a positive effect of internal politics on work engagement (Delle, 2013; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992), empirical literature is dominated by studies that confirmed the negative effect of perception of internal politics on work engagement (Cropanzano et al., 1997; Gbadamosi & Chinake, 2011; Sowmya & Panchanatham, 2011; Ram & Prabhakar, 2010; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005). Therefore, the first hypothesis is developed as follows

H1: Perception of internal politics has a negative influence on work engagement

The Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy

An individual's belief in his or her enact ability to organize and execute the actions needed to complete a given task is defined as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacious employees are recognized as individuals with self-confident, positive attitudes toward their work even in difficult work situations (Ballout, 2009; Karatepe et al., 2007). Those employees are better at job attendance, more proactive in their career choice and more effective in their decision-making process (Karatepe et al., 2007; Latham & Frayne, 1989). Therefore, empirical studies argue that self-efficacious employees are less likely to

be plagued by a negative work environment and psychological situation (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007; Karatepe et al., 2007). Researchers have also studied the indirect effect and moderating role of self-efficacy on behavioral changes (Jimmieson, 2000; Speier & Frese, 1997; Xanthopoulou et al., 2013). Jimmieson (2000) argues that, the effect of high work control on employee work stress is less for highly self-efficacious employees. Similarly, Speier and Frese (1997) reported that highly self-efficacious employees are stronger in personal initiatives in a complex and uncertain environment. Moreover, low self-efficacious individuals were found to be a group that is badly affected by the emotional demand and dissonance (Xanthopoulou et al., 2013).

Studies have used the behavioral plasticity theory (Pierce et al., 1993) to explain the moderating effect of self-efficacy. This theory explains extent to which individuals are affected by external factors. Accordingly, low self-efficacious individuals are more susceptible to external influence and more malleable than high self-efficacious individuals (Eden & Aviram, 1993; Pierce et al., 1993; Turban & Keon, 1993). Thus, less self-efficacious employees in a workplace are more easily affected by organizational conditions and environment. In contrast, high self-efficacious individuals in a workplace are less affected by external influences and factors as their high self-efficacy compensates for a lack of situation support (Liu et al., 2017). So, self-efficacious employees may not expect organizational support and may not give up even the situation is unfavorable. In order to test this inference, the study thus hypothesizes;

H₂: Self-efficacy moderates the impact of perception of internal politics on academic staff work engagement

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework suggested by the above theoretical framework

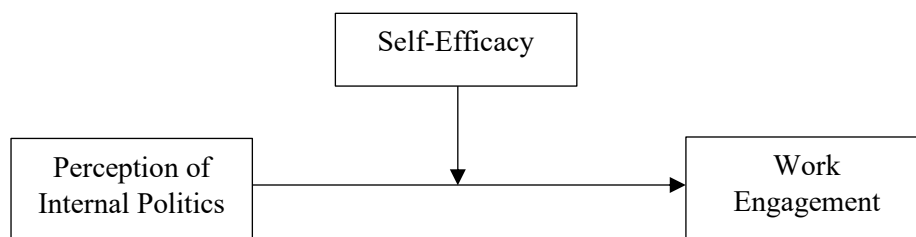


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

This study follows basic principles of explanatory research in which the theoretical framework and hypotheses of the study were derived from existing literature. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study findings, all the academic staff in Sri Lankan state universities were focused on and subject to the investigation. According to the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, there were 7022 academic staff in state universities in 2022.

Data were collected using an online survey. Email addresses of academic staff were obtained from publicly available institutional websites, and the survey was distributed electronically to 2,300 academics whose contact details were accessible. A total of 408 responses were received. After excluding 13 incomplete questionnaires, 395 valid responses were retained for the final analysis. Accordingly, a convenience sampling technique was employed, yielding a final sample size of 395.

Electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. The sample comprised 160 female (40.5%) and 235 male (59.5%) academics. In terms of academic rank, 35 respondents (8.9%) were Professors, 245 (62.0%) were Senior Lecturers, and the remaining 115 (29.1%) held positions as Lecturers or Lecturers (Probationary). With respect to service experience, 105 respondents (26.6%) reported more than 16 years of experience in the university system, while 45 respondents (11.4%) had less than three years of experience.

Instrumentation and Measures

Several measures were taken in designing and developing the questionnaire to correctly quantify the target variables through individual responses of the academics. The questionnaire consists of four main sections and very first section was devoted to obtain demographic information about the participants, such as sex, job position, area/s of specialization, the highest education qualification and work experience, which may have some significant influence over their perception of internal politics and work engagement.

Kacmar and Ferris's (1991) definition, "*degree to which the employees view their work environment as a political entity and use its power strategically to maximize self-interest rather than organizational common goals*" was adopted in this study, to operationalize perception of internal politics and also used Kacmar and Carlson's (1997) 12-item inventory to measure this variable. These items were on a Likert-type type 5 scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Cronbach's alpha test confirmed the internal consistency of these measures, reporting α as 0.84.

In line with Schaufeli et al. (2002), employee engagement is defined as a positive and motivational work-related attitude characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Accordingly, this study used the nine-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2006). For the purpose of this study, the items in this inventory were also on a Likert-type type 5 scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (Completely agree). The internal consistency was also ensured with the Cronbach's alpha test ($\alpha=0.78$).

For the purpose of this study, self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in his or her enact ability to organize and execute the actions needed to complete a given task (Bandura, 1986). Accordingly, Schwarzer et al.'s (1997) Generalized Self-Efficacy 10-item scale was used to measure the self-efficacy of the academic staff of the universities. The internal consistency reliability measure for this inventory, Cronbach's Alpha, was 0.84.

Data Analysis

Data analysis included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. Descriptive statistics, including mean, and standard deviation, were calculated to assess the behavior of the data for the main variables of the study. The correlation analysis assessed the inter-variable correlation to check the possible multicollinearity issues and it confirms that no multicollinearity exists among the data for perception of internal politics and self-efficacy. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses of the study. To test the mediator effect of self-efficacy, an interaction variable was created by multiplying median-centered values of the perception of internal politics and self-efficacy.

Results and Discussion

Sample Profile

As shown in Table 1 there were 235 male and 160 female respondents. The average age of the respondents was 45.89 years. In terms of job title, the majority of the respondents (123) were in Senior Lecturer category and average experience of 12 years.

Table 1 Demographic profile of the respondents

Characteristics	No. of respondents	%
Gender		
Female	160	40.5
Male	235	59.5
Highest Educational qualification		
PhD or equivalent	165	41.8
MPhil/Master	195	49.3
First degree	35	8.9
Job Title		
Senior Professor/Professors	35	8.9
Senior Lecturers	245	62.0
Lecturers	115	29.1
Work Experience		
Less than 3 years	45	11.4
3 – 5years	55	13.9
6 – 10 years	95	24.1
11 – 15 years	95	24.1
16 year or above	105	26.6

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z test to normality confirms that the data for -perception of internal politics ($Z=.985, p>0.01$), self-efficacy ($Z=1.196, p>0.05$), and work engagement ($Z=1.051, p>0.05$) are normally distributed and are appropriate for parametric statistical tests.

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for the main variables and correlation among them. According to the result, there is a negative and significant relationship between perception of internal politics and work engagement ($r=.485, p<.01$) and a positive relationship between self-efficacy and work engagement ($r=.427, p<.01$). Moreover, these correlations confirm that there is no multicollinearity among these variables which can contribute to generate spurious result from multiple regression analysis.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and correlations

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev	A	B	C
A. Perception of Internal Politics	3.305	.224	-		
B. Work Engagement	3.793	.188	-.485**	-	
C. Self-Efficacy	3.725	.239	-.344**	.427**	-

** - Correlation is significant at 0.001

Effect of Perception of Internal Politics on Work Engagement

Linear regression evaluated the effect of perception of internal politics on work engagement. The model I in Table 3 shows the regression result for the effect. The model explained 33 percent variation of WE represented by POI_P and F-value ($F=12.32, p<0.01$) confirms that the model is significant. The Beta coefficient ($B=-0.53, p<0.1$) showed the significant negative impact of POI_P on WE.

Table 3: Regression

Variable	Model I		Model II		Model III	
	β	p	β	p	β	p
Perception of Internal Politics (POI_P)	-.403	.000	-.318	.000	-.277	.000
Self-Efficacy (SE)			.230	.005	.130	.082
Interaction Term (POI_PxSE)					-.456	.000
R ² /Adj.R ²	.235		.310		.326	
F (p)	23.32($p<.01$)		16.88($p<.01$)		11.92($p<.01$)	

Moderation Effect of Self-efficacy

The moderation effect of self-efficacy was tested using the hierarchical regression and in the first step, the moderator variable was entered to the Model I and examined its effect. The Model 3 showed a significant improvement of R² (R² Change=0.05) after entering the moderator into the model.

Moreover, the Beta value ($B=-0.34, p<.01$) showed the negative effect of self-efficacy on the POI_P. Thereafter, the interaction term (POI_PxSE) was added to the analysis and its results are presented under Model 3. The results reveals that significant change of R^2 in the model compared to the Model 2 showing the significant effect of the interaction term and Beta value of the term ($B=-.34, p<0.01$) indicates that the relationship between POI_P and WE is weak when SE is higher and vice versa. Thus, self-efficacy moderates the relationship between POI_P and work engagement.

Discussion

Consistent with prior empirical evidence highlighting the detrimental effects of perceived internal politics on work-related outcomes (AL-Abrow, 2022; Barrick et al., 2015; Burakova et al., 2022; Crawford et al., 2010; Kaur & Kang, 2023; Lee, 2024; Malik & Pichler, 2023; Mehmood et al., 2023; Murtaza et al., 2024; Nazir et al., 2024; Ogwuche et al., 2024; Park & Lee, 2020; Ugwu et al., 2022), the findings of the present study confirm a significant negative relationship between the perception of internal politics and work engagement among university academic staff. This result indicates that when academics perceive their work environment as politically charged, characterized by self-serving behavior and unfair practices, their psychological connection to work diminishes.

This finding reinforces theoretical perspectives suggesting that politically driven environments erode key psychological resources such as trust, fairness perceptions, and meaningfulness of work, which are essential antecedents of work engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Academics experiencing high levels of perceived internal politics are likely to disengage cognitively and emotionally from their work as a coping mechanism, thereby reducing discretionary effort and enthusiasm. Such disengagement may subsequently manifest in adverse individual and organizational outcomes, including increased absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, and lower performance levels, as consistently reported in earlier studies (Kaur & Kang, 2023; Malik & Pichler, 2023; Mehmood et al., 2023; Murtaza et al., 2024; Nazir et al., 2024).

Importantly, this study extends the existing body of knowledge by empirically demonstrating this relationship within the context of public sector higher education institutions in Sri Lanka—an underrepresented setting in organizational politics research. Given the unique structural characteristics of public universities, such as bureaucratic governance, resource constraints, and hierarchical decision-making, these findings underscore the relevance of internal politics as a critical contextual factor shaping academic engagement. Thus, the study contributes to the limited literature examining work engagement outcomes in public sector organizations, particularly within developing-country contexts.

Furthermore, the present study advances the literature by examining the moderating role of self-efficacy in the relationship between perceived internal politics and work engagement. The results reveal that self-efficacy plays a significant buffering role, mitigating the negative impact of perceived internal politics on work engagement. Academics with high self-efficacy appear better equipped to navigate

politically charged environments, maintaining focus, motivation, and involvement in their work despite unfavorable organizational conditions. This finding aligns with social cognitive theory, which posits that individuals with strong beliefs in their capabilities are more resilient in the face of environmental stressors and are more likely to sustain goal-directed behavior.

By demonstrating the protective role of self-efficacy, this study provides new insights into how personal resources can offset the harmful effects of organizational politics. It suggests that enhancing self-efficacy among academic staff may serve as a viable strategy for sustaining work engagement in politicized organizational contexts. Overall, the findings highlight the dual importance of reducing dysfunctional political practices while simultaneously strengthening individual psychological resources to promote engagement and positive work outcomes in public sector universities.

Conclusion

This study examined the interplay between the perception of internal politics, work engagement, and self-efficacy among university academics, addressing the mixed empirical evidence surrounding the relationship between perceived internal politics and work engagement. The findings confirm a significant negative effect of perceived internal politics on work engagement, while providing novel evidence that self-efficacy moderates this relationship. Specifically, academics with higher levels of self-efficacy remain more engaged in their work even in highly politicized environments, highlighting the importance of individual psychological resources in mitigating adverse organizational conditions.

This study makes several important contributions to the literature. First, it extends organizational politics research by empirically validating the detrimental impact of perceived internal politics on work engagement within the academic context, particularly in public sector universities. Second, by incorporating self-efficacy as a moderating variable, the study advances existing theoretical models by demonstrating how personal resources interact with contextual stressors to shape work engagement. This finding enriches social cognitive and job demands–resources perspectives by confirming self-efficacy as a critical buffering mechanism against politically charged work environments. Consequently, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of employee engagement under adverse organizational conditions.

The findings offer important implications for university administrators and policymakers. The negative association between internal politics and work engagement underscores the need for institutional efforts to reduce politically driven practices by promoting transparency, fairness, and clear governance mechanisms in decision-making related to rewards, promotions, and resource allocation. Additionally, the demonstrated buffering role of self-efficacy suggests that universities should actively invest in developing academics' psychological capabilities. Training and development programs, mentoring initiatives, and opportunities for professional autonomy can strengthen self-efficacy, enabling

academics to remain motivated and engaged even when organizational politics cannot be eliminated. A dual strategy that minimizes dysfunctional political behavior while enhancing individual resilience is therefore essential for sustaining high levels of academic engagement and performance.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of a cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences among the study variables. Second, data were collected through self-reported measures, which may be subject to common method bias and social desirability effects. Finally, the use of convenience sampling and the focus on Sri Lankan state universities may limit the generalizability of the findings to other organizational or national contexts.

Therefore, future studies could address these limitations by adopting longitudinal or experimental research designs to establish causal relationships between perceived internal politics and work engagement. Moreover, comparative studies across different sectors or countries would help assess the cultural and institutional influences on organizational politics and work engagement.

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