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Bridging Theory and Practice: Theoretical, Conceptual, and Research Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

The utilisation of theory, the conceptual framework, the theoretical framework, and the research framework is frequently required to be clearly articulated in academic studies. However, these terms are often used interchangeably without a clear understanding of their distinctions. This scenario is complicated because the terms theoretical, conceptual, and research frameworks are employed differently in different research approaches. This article aims to define these concepts and explain their usage with two research approaches: the objectivist deductive approach, which goes from theory to data, and the subjectivist inductive approach, which goes from data to theory, together with a research framework. The theoretical framework provides the foundation of established theories and principles underpinning the study, offering a broad lens through which the research phenomenon is understood. The conceptual framework, derived from the theoretical framework, refines the understanding by delineating specific constructs and their interrelationships, serving as a guide to address the research objectives. Meanwhile, the research framework translates these constructs into operationalised variables and methodologies, facilitating the systematic collection and analysis of data. Together, these frameworks ensure the study's alignment with established knowledge while enabling methodological rigour and clarity in addressing the research problem. Furthermore, the integration of research, conceptual, and theoretical frameworks not only guides the logical flow of a study and strengthens its academic foundation but also enhances its potential to generate meaningful insights across diverse domains, including business innovation and strategy, international business and marketing, technology and operations management, corporate governance and ethics, human resource and project management, and entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Conceptual Framework, Research Framework, Theoretical Framework

1. INTRODUCTION

Researchers can address research questions using quantitative, qualitative, or a combination of both, applying various methodological traditions. Research involves different methods, such as surveys, interviews, observations, artefact analysis, or instruments, regardless of the methodology. To ensure coherence with the discipline's perspective, it is essential to situate the research within the broader scholarly literature. This process often relies on theoretical, conceptual, and research frameworks. However, new researchers frequently find the purpose and function of these frameworks confusing. Theoretical, conceptual, and research frameworks play a critical role in shaping methodological choices and interpreting significant findings in research. These frameworks, each addressing the research problem from a distinct vantage point, form indispensable components of studies.

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However, for emerging scholars, navigating the complexities of these frameworks often presents a significant challenge. The diversity of available resources, coupled with varying interpretations and approaches to their construction and application, can create confusion, particularly for those seeking a clear understanding of their distinctions and practical development.

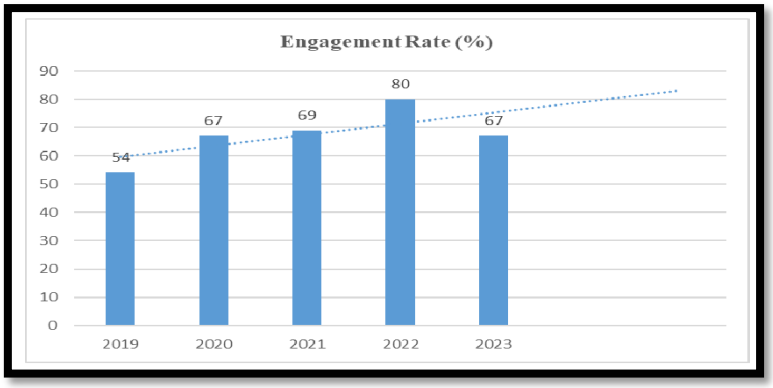

Figure 1. Employee Engagement in Malaysia (adopted from Hossan et al., 2024)

Figure 1 is used to provide a real-world example of theoretical, conceptual, and research frameworks in the context of employee engagement in Malaysia. The engagement rate was 54% in 2019, followed by a sharp increase to 67% in 2020 and 69% in 2021. The highest engagement rate of 80% was recorded in 2022, marking the peak of employee engagement. However, in 2023, the rate declined to 67%, indicating a drop from the previous year.

A theoretical framework explains the fundamental principles and theories that guide a study (Tisdell et al., 2025). The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory is a well-established framework that explains how different job characteristics influence employee well-being and engagement. According to JD-R, job demands and resources (both job-related and personal) play a crucial role in determining an employee's level of engagement and performance (Bakker et al., 2023). In this case, the increased engagement from 54% in 2019 to 80% in 2022 can be explained by the job and personal resources available to employees. The resources help employees manage their job demands effectively. As job resources increase, employees are more likely to be energised and engaged, contributing to greater job satisfaction, organisational productivity, and retention. However, the decline in engagement in 2023 (from 80% to 67%) can be attributed to increased job demands. According to JD-R theory, when job demands exceed available resources, employees experience burnout and disengagement, leading to a drop in engagement.

A conceptual framework defines the specific variables and their relationships in the study context (Ghanad, 2023). In this framework, employee engagement is defined as the dependent variable, with key independent variables such as job demands, job resources, and personal resources examined. The framework explores how these factors influence engagement trends, particularly the increase from 2019 to 2022 and the decline in 2023. The relationship between these variables helps explain why engagement fluctuates over time.

The research framework is a structured approach for testing the conceptual model using specific methods and hypotheses (Ghofar & Islam, 2014). It provides a systematic methodology to test the conceptual model. This study employs quantitative analysis using survey data from employees in Malaysia between 2019 and 2023. Engagement rates are measured through Likert-scale surveys, company performance indicators, and employee feedback reports. Hypothesis testing is conducted to determine whether factors such as job demands, job resources and personal resources significantly impact engagement levels. Statistical tools, such as SPSS regression analysis, Smart-PLS path coefficient and trend analysis, are used to validate the findings and assess engagement trends over the years. This paper aims to define the concepts of theoretical,

conceptual, and research frameworks by examining their definitions, functions, and interrelationships within the broader context of academic inquiry.

2. CLARIFYING THEORY AND FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Theory

The term 'theory' has the same meaning in subjectivist inductive and objectivist deductive research. According to Kerlinger (1966) and Lee (2025), a theory is a collection of logically connected assertions expressing the relationship or relationships between multiple structures and propositions. To put it another way, a theory is an abstract explanation of the connections between ideas that aid in our comprehension of the outside world. Preliminary evidence or a large body of studies can support a theory; the more evidence that supports a theory, the stronger it is. Theories may be disruptive (i.e., expanding on or disputing existing knowledge), explanatory (i.e., elucidating the connections between phenomena), emancipatory (i.e., articulating the oppression of a people), descriptive (i.e., naming and characterising a phenomenon), or predictive (i.e., forecasting an outcome based on particular inputs). Different theories may also have varying degrees of explanatory capacity (Baskerville & Pries-Heje, 2010).

a. Grand theories, such as Marxist theories of society, are abstract and address broad natural or social patterns.
b. Actor-network theory represents a middle-range theory, focusing on specific aspects of human interactions.
c. Symbolic interactionism is a micro theory that examines individual-level phenomena.

A single phenomenon is frequently the subject of several theories that help scholars comprehend it. For instance, there are several ideas on human agency, which is the degree to which people have power over their social and personal lives. The notions abstractly define whether an individual possesses autonomy, how it manifests, the factors that enable or hinder it, and how personal autonomy operates within a larger societal framework, such as a team, organisation, or community. Theorists include Giddens, Bourdieu, Butler, McNay, and Bandura, who have all examined various facets of agency, providing unique perspectives on the phenomena, as noted by Varpio et al. (2017). As seen by this example, several academics present conflicting theories to account for phenomena. To choose the theory that best guides their investigation into a particular phenomenon, the researchers must read widely.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

To guide a study, a researcher develops a theoretical framework, which is a logically formed and interrelated set of concepts and premises derived from one or more theories. These ideas and presumptions, however, may be borrowed from a theoretical tradition for research aimed at developing theory. The researcher must describe any ideas and notions that will serve as the foundation for the study, connect them logically, and connect them to the research being conducted in order to develop a theoretical framework (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). To put it briefly, the effort a researcher makes to apply a theory or multiple theories in a particular study is reflected in a theoretical framework, such as JD-R Theory for the studies related to employee engagement.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is the rationale for the necessity of a specific investigation. The conceptual framework (1) highlights gaps in the understanding of a phenomenon or problem; (2) defines the status of existing information, often through a literature review; and (3) specifies the research project's methodological foundations. It is designed to respond to two inquiries posed

by Maxwell (2013): "What is the significance of this research?" and "In what ways do these findings contribute to the existing body of knowledge?"

2.4 Research Framework

The broad structure that directs and arranges the research process is called a research framework. To guarantee coherence and alignment, it offers a methodical approach for the investigation, using components from theoretical and conceptual frameworks. A well-constructed research framework is fundamental to ensuring the rigour, validity, and reliability of a study. It serves as a structured foundation that enables researchers to systematically organise their thoughts, pinpoint gaps in existing literature, and articulate a precise and focused research question. Beyond offering direction for data collection and analysis, the framework establishes guiding principles that help mitigate biases, minimise errors, and ensure consistency throughout the research process. Additionally, it facilitates the identification of patterns, trends, and relationships among variables, enabling researchers to derive meaningful and evidence-based conclusions from their findings.

3. OBJECTIVIST DEDUCTIVE AND SUBJECTIVIST INDUCTIVE APPROACHES

While the definitions of theory, theoretical, and conceptual frameworks remain consistent across various research paradigms, their application differs markedly between objectivist, deductive methodologies and subjectivist, inductive approaches. Figure 2 highlights the main differences and connections between these terminologies and their uses.

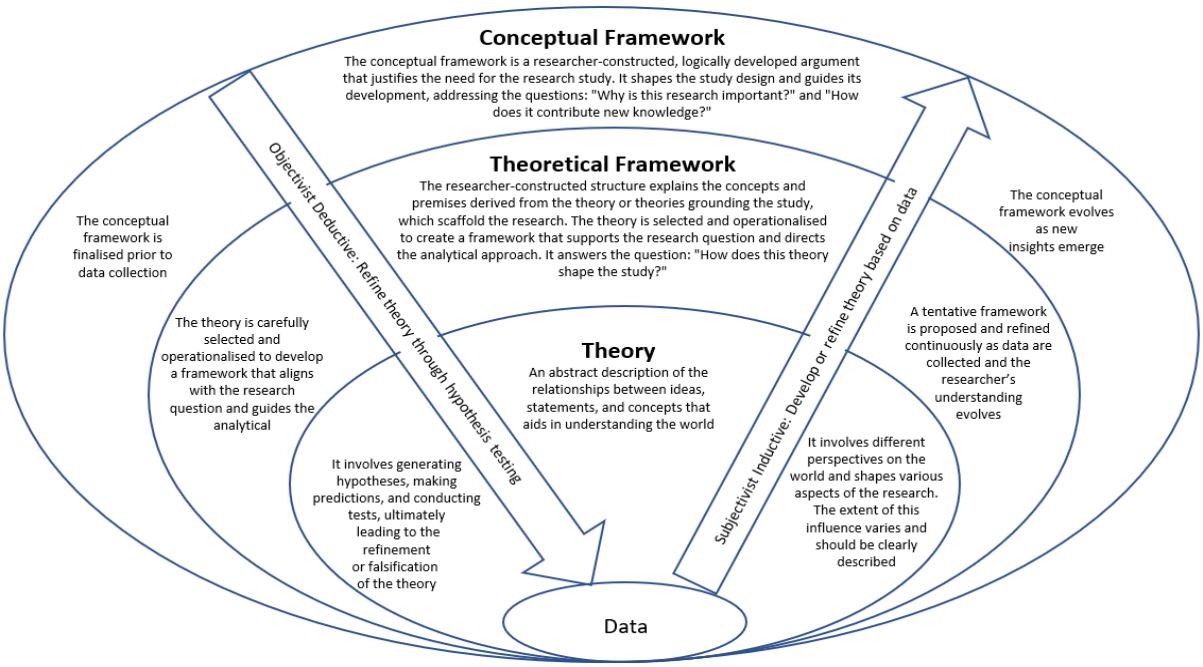

Figure 2. Objectivist Deductive and Subjectivist Inductive Approaches

3.1 The Objectivist Deductive Approach in Research

Deductive research adopts a top-down approach, progressing from broad, abstract constructs to specific, measurable observations within a defined context. This method involves formulating hypotheses grounded in theoretical constructs and testing them through empirical investigation.

The outcomes of such research can confirm, challenge, refine, or expand existing theoretical conceptualisations. Objectivist paradigms such as positivism (Park et al., 2020) and post positivism (Young & Ryan, 2020) commonly employ the deductive approach.

Objectivist deductive research is grounded in two core assumptions: first, that an external reality exists independently of the researcher, and second, that this reality can be understood by collecting unbiased, objective evidence (Wheeler & Bruscia, 2016). This approach seeks to expand knowledge by uncovering increasingly nuanced insights into the causal mechanisms governing the world. Experiments, conducted in laboratories, classrooms, or naturalistic environments, are among the most frequently employed methods within this paradigm. Research questions framed through objectivist deductive reasoning often focus on testing foundational assumptions and exploring the causal relationships that underpin observed phenomena.

3.1.1 The Role of Theory in Objectivist Deductive Research

The research endeavour usually begins with a hypothesis when using objectivist deductive research. The theory provides testable elements, such as the variables pertinent to control, the concepts that should be operationalised, and the cause-and-effect correlations that may be investigated. These testable elements produce specific hypotheses that serve as the study's cornerstone. A fundamental premise of this method is that the theory is a component of the study object. Put another way, the hypothesis under test is a component of the relevant theory. As a result, the study evaluates a theory-based hypothesis and the theory that supports it simultaneously.

All research using an objectivist deductive approach has two essential features of theory: a theory must (1) be testable and (2) be susceptible to falsification. According to this method, a reasonable hypothesis usually expands on earlier research. By providing further data to bolster, bolster, or refute an idea, research contributes new information. A more robust theory and/or better future predictions are made possible by this kind of study, which gradually increases knowledge through incremental investigations in theory-oriented work programmes. It is rare for a researcher to integrate many theories in a single study using a completely objectivist deductive technique.

Developing a single, theory-informed hypothesis is challenging when it starts with several hypotheses. The chain of conclusions that may be drawn from a theory's gradual testing and improvement would be broken by the mixing of hypotheses, making it difficult to pinpoint the precise causal nature of the studied connection. A straight path must be followed in an objectivist deductive approach: theory, hypothesis formation, data collection, interpretation of results, theory revision, or creation of new causal explanations. A new study may begin with an updated or novel theory produced through research on how objectivist deductive researchers apply a theoretical framework.

The initial task for an objectivist deductive researcher is to identify the theory that will underpin the study's theoretical framework. This framework operationalises the theory by defining key variables and conditions, constructing the concepts of interest, specifying the precise terminology and assumptions of the research question, and guiding the analytical approach. This process makes the theory practical, testable, and applicable for predicting outcomes, testing hypotheses, or explaining phenomena. Within the objectivist deductive tradition, the theoretical framework is typically established before data collection and remains fixed throughout the research process. Once a suitable theory is selected, the researcher develops the theoretical framework, positioning the theory as the focal point of the investigation.

By evaluating hypotheses and integrating data from various research settings, such studies hold a distinctive potential to further understanding within their domain. As a result, peer reviewers

of objective deductive research stress the necessity of a clearly defined theoretical framework. This framework guides the study's structure and places the research within a recognised tradition of inquiry, building upon the same foundational theory.

The Objectivist Deductive Research Process: Theory > Theoretical Framework Development > Operationalisation of Concepts & Variables > Hypothesis Formation > Data Collection > Data Analysis & Interpretation > Hypothesis Testing > Theory Confirmation, Revision, or New Explanation.

3.1.2 The Role of Conceptual Frameworks in Objectivist Deductive Research

A conceptual framework for objectivist deductive research usually consists of a description of pertinent literature, an overview of the relevant theory, an explanation of how this theory might be instructive in this particular context, a specific research question that probably contains a hypothesis, a justification for the chosen research methodology, and several outcomes or variables of interest. A conceptual framework is developed before the research begins, and it is rarely changed once data collection has started.

3.2 The Subjectivist Inductive Approach in Research

Inductive research is conceptualising a phenomenon generally or abstractly after gathering specific evidence. The method is bottom-up, meaning data is worked up to abstract conceptualisations. A desire to comprehend or explain a particular phenomenon is the starting point for subjectivist inductive study, not a hypothesis. To develop a knowledge of the phenomena, the researcher gathers data and/or information about it and looks for patterns in the data. Critical theory (Paradis et al., 2020) and constructionism (Rees et al., 2020) are two paradigms that frequently employ the subjectivist inductive approach. Subjectivist inductive research is grounded in two key assumptions: first, reality is socially and experientially constructed, meaning that it is a fluid and contingent social phenomenon shaped by the shared interpretations and understandings of individuals and groups rather than existing as an objective, external truth.

Second, to understand these constructed realities, researchers must explore the meanings individuals and social groups have attributed to their experiences and interactions. This implies that knowledge is a subjective concept, with different people having different perspectives on the same phenomenon. A more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the phenomenon can be obtained by gathering data from various viewpoints. A popular method for subjectivist inductive research is to examine a phenomenon in a particular setting, frequently using focus groups, interviews, and/or observations. In cooperation with research participants, researchers actively and subjectively generate research outcomes. To better comprehend phenomena or assumptions, this approach uses research questions. Using a subjectivist inductive approach, for example, a researcher examines employee engagement trends through a theoretical lens grounded in organisational psychology to understand the underlying factors influencing engagement rates from 2019 to 2023. The conceptual framework is developed from qualitative data collected via employee interviews, focus groups, and observations, revealing that engagement increased from 54% in 2019 to 80% in 2022 due to leadership support, flexible work policies, and recognition programmes. However, in 2023, engagement declined to 67%, as employees reported concerns related to organisational restructuring, increased workload, and reduced job security.
The research framework follows an exploratory design, emphasising socially constructed employee perceptions to identify key organisational and psychological determinants of engagement. These findings contribute to the broader theoretical understanding of workplace dynamics, leadership effectiveness, and HR policies, offering insights for developing targeted strategies to sustain employee motivation and commitment.

3.2.1 The Role of Theory in Subjectivist Inductive Research

In the subjectivist inductive paradigm, theory serves dual roles: as a mental framework that influences the researcher's cognitive processes and decisions related to study design and as an abstract idea investigated through academic literature and discourse. In contrast to other methods, hypotheses in this framework are not fixed; they emerge as the researcher's experiences, beliefs, and viewpoints progress.

Moreover, the subjectivist inductive investigator may engage with multiple hypotheses within a single study or across a broader research agenda, promoting a fluid and flexible investigation of the research inquiry. According to Creswell (2009), subjectivist inductive researchers employ theory in three primary ways.

First, research might result in a theory. The data is used to build theory in specific subjectivist inductive research, particularly by researchers in the grounded theory school of Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; 1967). As a result, a theory is the primary product of the research endeavour. It develops from a methodical inductive approach to data analysis rather than being utilised to guide study design. Regarding subjectivist inductive research, this method is the most inductive. This research design is known as the fully inductive theory development study.

Second, one or several hypotheses can guide the whole study process. In this context, theory shapes the entire research process, including formulating the research topic, methodological choices, data collection, analysis, and interpreting results (Stewart & Klein, 2016; Yin, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Each element of the study design is strategically aligned with the guiding hypotheses, which are articulated at the outset of the inquiry. In other words, theory is a foundational framework that informs and justifies every aspect of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). In this approach, a key outcome of the study may involve refining existing theories or developing new theoretical frameworks. This design is commonly referred to as a fully theory-informed inductive study.

Third, theory can function as a tool for interpreting research findings. Some scholars contend that selecting the appropriate theoretical lens to guide the interpretation of data is best determined through iterative data collection and analysis cycles. When planning the study and gathering data, the researcher has several ideas. The researcher won't decide which theory or theories should influence the final study interpretations and results until data analysis procedures are underway. As a result, when the researcher discovers that a particular hypothesis is pertinent halfway through the data analysis process, the study design may need to be changed.

For example, following cycles of data collecting and analysis may expressly aim to explore evidence that would confirm, reject, or give new insights into the theory if the researcher discovers early on that a particular theory might assist in explaining the data. This is not a problem with the study's design. Instead, it is the outcome of thorough data analysis that shows a particular theory to be pertinent to the study's conclusions. Once again, the investigation may lead to the growth and improvement of the theory. It is known as the research design for theory-informed inductive data analysis.

Each of these three approaches to theory is equally legitimate. However, in order to be rigorous, researchers need to decide early on exactly when and how they will employ theory in their work. The research project's contributions to knowledge frequently include changes to the theory. In fact, inductive research prioritises theoretical contributions; creating a new theory or disputing, expanding upon, or improving an existing theory is highly regarded.

3.2.2 The Role of Theoretical Frameworks in Subjectivist Inductive Research

Before developing a theoretical framework, the subjectivist inductive researcher must first select the most appropriate method from the three primary options: fully inductive theory development, fully theory-informed inductive research, and theory-informed inductive data analysis. This decision, along with practical considerations such as crafting interview or focus group questions, choosing participants, and identifying relevant sensitising concepts (if applicable), will influence the formation of the theoretical framework. When a fully inductive theory development method is used, the theory will not guide the research design. Since there is no pre-existing theory to incorporate into the study's framework, constructing a theoretical framework becomes impractical. Instead, the research will rely on a well-defined conceptual framework.

In fully theory-informed inductive research design, the researcher starts by selecting the theory or theories that will act as the conceptual lens for the study. The selected theory is then translated into a framework that outlines its impact on various aspects of the research, such as the development of research questions, the approach to the research setting, the core concepts guiding the study framework, the selected methodology, data gathering, interactions with participants, analytical techniques, and the conclusions drawn.

When multiple theories are utilised, the researcher must explain how each theory interconnects and contributes to shaping all facets of the study. This procedure illustrates how theory shapes each component of the research design. Although the theoretical framework is initially constructed before the commencement of the study, it remains flexible, with adjustments possible as new insights arise during the research process. Furthermore, as the research progresses and new data is generated through the researcher-participant collaboration, the research question may be refined to better align with the evolving findings.

In theory-informed inductive data analysis research design, the researcher typically delays the selection of theory until after the completion of data analysis. The theoretical framework evolves as data collection and analysis progress (often through iterative cycles). The selected theory can impact various facets of the research process (Mertens, 2023). While theory is chosen once some or all of the data have been gathered, the framework helps clarify how theory informs the research setting, shapes the developing study design, and directs the selection of concepts, methodology, data gathering, participant interactions, analytical techniques, and conclusions.

For instance, in a study examining residents' perceptions of interprofessional collaboration using interviews, a theory centred on group dynamics might steer additional data collection through focus groups to explore group interactions. It is crucial to note that theory does not prescribe every aspect of the study; instead, it influences specific components of the research design. The theoretical framework, therefore, clarifies which parts of the study are shaped by theory and how. The researcher's role is to translate theoretical concepts into practical contributions that shape particular study design elements and the theoretical framework's development.

3.2.3 The Role of Conceptual Frameworks in Subjectivist Inductive Research

In a subjectivist inductive approach, the conceptual framework is expected to develop as new ideas, perspectives, and data arise during the research process. Consequently, researchers often initiate their studies with a tentative conceptual framework, recognising that it may require modification as data alter their comprehension of the explored phenomena. This initial framework generally incorporates a survey of pertinent literature, a summary of relevant theory (mainly when using fully theory-driven inductive or theory-guiding inductive data analysis methods), a justification for the chosen research question(s), and a rationale for the selected research methodology.

4. BRIDGING AMONG THEORETICAL, CONCEPTUAL, AND RESEARCH FRAMEWORKS

4.1 Role of The Theoretical Framework in The Research Framework

The theoretical framework provides the foundation for the research framework by offering established theories that explain the phenomena under investigation. It situates the research problem within a broader academic context, highlighting key principles, assumptions, and constructs derived from existing literature.

In the research framework, the theoretical framework plays the following roles:

a. **Guiding Hypotheses and Objectives:** It shapes the research questions and hypotheses by providing a theoretical basis.
b. **Framing Data Interpretation:** It helps interpret findings in light of established theories.
c. **Ensuring Scholarly Rigour:** It situates the study within an academic tradition, enhancing its credibility.

For example, a study on leadership and organisational performance might use transformational leadership theory as a theoretical framework to explain why leadership influences employee motivation.

4.2 Role of the Conceptual Framework in the Research Framework

The conceptual framework, conversely, bridges the theoretical framework and the operational aspects of the study. It focuses on specific concepts or variables and illustrates their relationships, often through a visual representation. In the research framework, the conceptual framework contributes by:

a. **Defining Variables:** It identifies the key variables or constructs to be studied.
b. **Clarifying Relationships:** It shows how these variables interact or influence each other.
c. **Guiding Methodology:** It informs the selection of data collection and analysis techniques.

For instance, if the research examines how leadership style impacts employee productivity, the conceptual framework might include variables like 'leadership style' (independent variable), 'employee morale' (mediating variable), and 'productivity' (dependent variable), with arrows showing their hypothesised relationships.

4.3 Integrating Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks into the Research Framework

The research framework integrates insights from both theoretical and conceptual frameworks to establish a coherent research design:

a. **Theoretical Inputs:** The theoretical framework ensures the study is rooted in established knowledge and offers a lens for understanding the phenomenon.
b. **Operationalisation via Conceptual Framework:** The conceptual framework translates theoretical insights into measurable constructs and guides the study's practical execution.
c. **Methodological Alignment:** The research framework specifies the methods, tools, and procedures used to test the relationships outlined in the conceptual framework, ensuring they align with the theoretical foundations.

Figure 3 illustrates the differentiation among theoretical, conceptual, and research frameworks in the context of employee engagement in Malaysia, based on the real-world example presented in Figure 1.

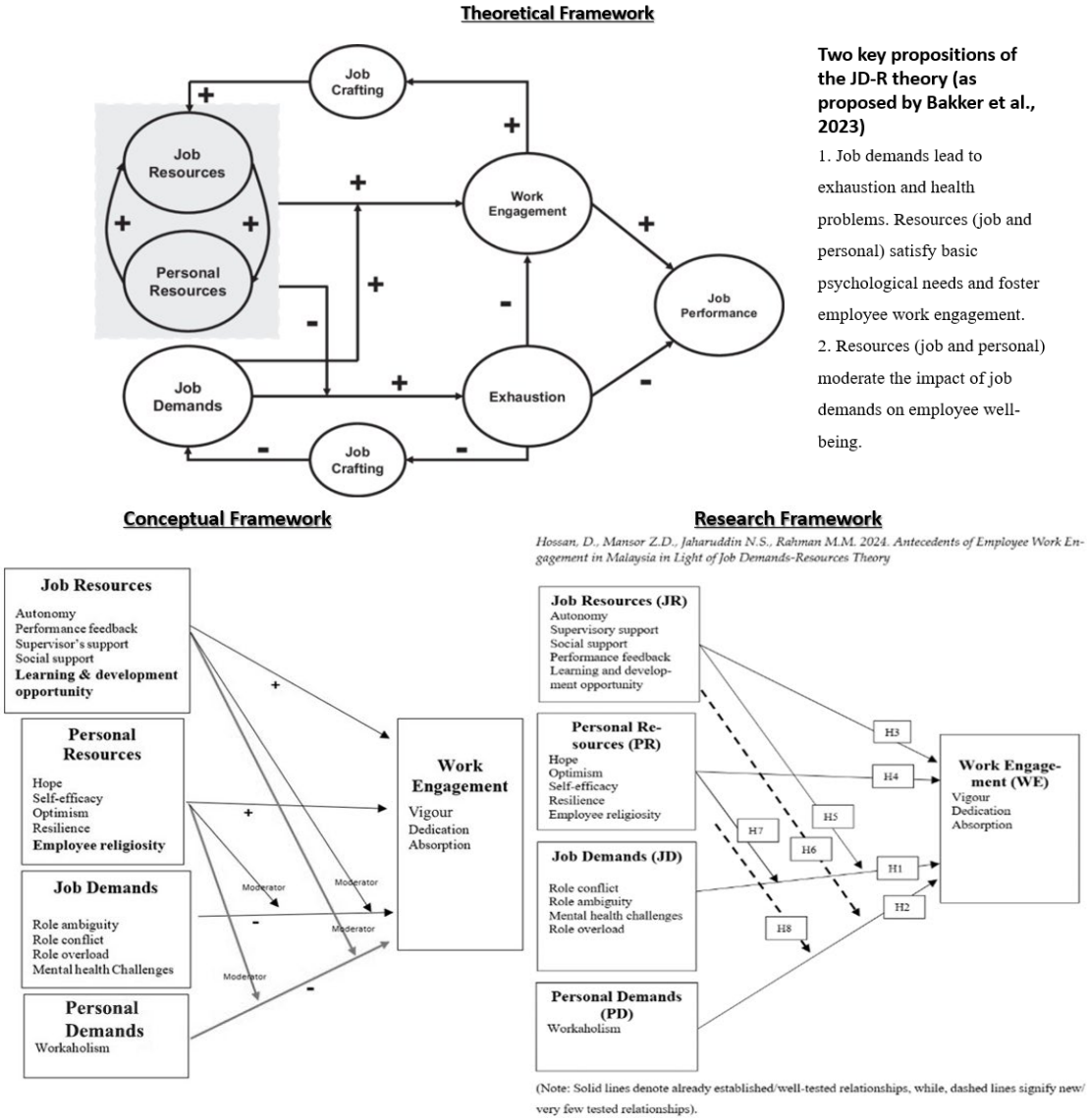

Figure 3. Differentiation among Theoretical, Conceptual, and Research Frameworks

To provide a clear understanding of how the theoretical, conceptual, and research frameworks contribute to a study, Table 1 below outlines their key components and relationships.

Table 1 Overview of Theoretical, Conceptual, and Research Frameworks

Framework	Description	Details
Theoretical Framework	Provides foundational theory and propositions.	Uses JD-R Theory (Bakker et al., 2023) to hypothesise that demands and resources influence work engagement.
Conceptual Framework	Specifies theory components for the research context, focusing on constructs and relationships.	Identifies key variables: job resources, personal resources, job demands, and work engagement. Based on the concept and previous studies, personal demands, learning and development opportunity, and employee religiosity have been attached to bring novelty.
Research Framework	Formulates hypotheses and refines the conceptual framework into an empirical investigation.	Outlines methodology, sampling, data collection, and analysis.

This integration ensures that the research framework is theoretically grounded, conceptually clear, and methodologically sound, effectively guiding the research process.

5. CONCLUSION

The research framework, informed by theoretical and conceptual frameworks, serves as the blueprint for a study. Theoretical frameworks explain the 'why' behind the research, conceptual frameworks define the relationships between variables, and the research framework operationalises these insights to outline the steps to be taken. Together, these frameworks ensure the study is theoretically robust and practically feasible. Researchers should carefully define them, as they provide clarity and focus, align theory with practice and ground the research in existing knowledge. By clearly outlining the frameworks in future studies across diverse domains, including business innovation, international business, business strategy, marketing, e-business, business ethics, business economics, business accounting and finance, technology management, operations management, risk management, corporate policies, corporate social responsibility, human resource management, project management, social and community entrepreneurship, technology entrepreneurship, SMEs, intrapreneurship, and entrepreneurship, researchers can create valuable research that offers practical insights and boosts the credibility and impact of their work.

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