# Theorizing University Students' Engagement Behavior in Learning: A Faculty of Business and Management Perspective

**Siti Halijjah Shariff[1], Lennora Putit[2] and Maliza Delima Kamarul Zaman[3]**

[1]Arshad Ayub Graduate Business School
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
sitihali@uitm.edu.my

[2]Department of Entrepreneurship and Marketing Sudies,
Faculty of Business and Management,
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
lennora633@uitm.edu.my

[3]Department of Management and International Business
Faculty of Business and Management,
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
malizadelima@uitm.edu.my

Received: 8 August 2020 Revised from: 25 September 2020 Acccepted: 20 Ocotber 2020
Published: 31 Ocotber 2020

**Abstract**

Engagement studies have been widely researched over the past decade. This theoretical paper highlights the need to examine influential factors such as students' attitude, academics' influence, and perceived control on knowledge and skills are affecting students' engagement behavior in the learning developmental process. The study employs a quantitative research design by using quota-sampling technique. A total of 300 survey questionnaires are to be distributed to undergraduate students from the business and management faculty of a public university. Descriptive and inferential statistical procedures for data analysis would be carried out using both SPSS and Smart PLS-SEM statistical software. This study holds potential contribution towards generation of knowledge in understanding the psychological drives for learning engagement and its behavioral outcomes. By assuring active learning engagement amongst university students, it can attainably assist towards nation building of employable graduates who are knowledgeable, skillful, and resilient upon embracing the Industry Revolution 4.0.

**Keywords:** Learning, Engagement, Theory of Planned Behavior, University, Students' Attitude, Academics' Influences, Faculty, Perceived Behavioural Control, Knowledge and Skills

## 1.0 Introduction

Over the past decade, quality and value of tertiary education have been continuing to receive immense scrutiny by various stakeholders associated with a global higher education community (e.g. Ismail, Fakri, Mohammad, Nor, Ahmad & Yusoff, 2018; Theron & Bitzer, 2016; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). As a result of these higher educational institutions (HEIs) agenda, one ascending issue is the extent to which students' engagement in the learning process is encouraging enough to increase their academic performance. Engagement has been generally identified as a research priority within the academic literature and it has been addressed from many diverse perspectives (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2014).

Drawing upon the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1991) and engagement construct, this study intends to further explore the mechanics of engagement by looking at the extent to which influencing factors such as students' attitude, academics' influences and students' perceived behavioral control on knowledge and skills can affect their learning engagement behavior. This would then subsequently lead to their improvement in learning performance at the universities. In this context, engagement is determined by interactions between the learning environment and the individual, so that social and academic changes in class modify students' perceptions and engagement. Past research suggests that engagement mediates the influence of students' knowledge, skills, belief/mental activity and faculty's attitude on student learning performance and achievements. Moreover, the interactions between students and the social environment influence the engagement developed in the students' learning experience. Ismail et al (2018) for example, found that students are able to get the best learning experience if lecturers are expected to teach and evaluate their teaching methods effectively.

This research currently embarks on three-fold objectives: Firstly, is to assess the level of perception towards university students' engagement behavior in the learning process. Secondly is to determine whether attitude (students' attitudinal beliefs), subjective norms (acdemics' influence) and perceived behavioral control (knowledge and skills) may affect students' learning engagement behavior. Thirdly, is to examine the most significant influencing factor affecting students learning engagement behavior. This study further addresses the following research questions: 1. What are the current level of perceptions toward engagement behavior in the learning process amongst university students? 2. To what extent do students' attitude, academics' influence, and perceived behavioral control on knowledge and skills likely to affect students' learning engagement? 3. Which predictors significantly influence university students' learning engagement behavior?

## 2.0 Literature Review

Notwithstanding the widely received attention on engagement construct, there are pertinent issues in its conceptualization, which lead to possible duplication and lack of differentiation between engagement and other existing concepts. Despite attempts to create new methods to measure and monitor the quality of undergraduate education, little new knowledge has been generated about indicators of educational practice that predict student engagement (Boyaci et al, 2018; Zepke & Leach, 2010) or the approaches that a faculty takes to effective educational practices (Ismail et al, 2018; Boyaci et al 2018).

### 2.1. Engagement Behavior

Nowadays, most institutions, educators and students in higher education globally are increasingly challenged by governments to contribute towards national economic achievement. One aspect of this challenge is a drive to improve student success, understood as increasing or widening participation, achieving high levels of course completion and attaining a passport to employment with a positive attitude to lifelong learning (Yorke, 2006). How students engage

with their studies and what the institutions and educators can do to improve engagement have been well researched since the 1990s (Shernoff et al., 2014). Approaches to engagement research have varied. Some researchers focus on student agency and motivation as factors in engagement (Schuetz, 2008). Others highlight the approaches that educators practice and relate to their students (Boyaci et al, 2018) and the roles of institutional structures and cultures (Ismail et al., 2018; Porter, 2006). Yet, others focus on the socio-political context in which education and engagement take place (McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Yorke, 2006) and the impact on students of environmental factors such as family background and economic status (Shernoff et al., 2014; Law, 2005; Miliszewska & Horwood, 2004).

It is crucial to understand the connections between student learning and student engagement. Learning requires the learner to be actively engaged in the process of learning. In adopting this concept of learning, teaching instructors need to plan and design out-of-classroom experiences that directly relate to identified learning outcomes. The student engagement paradigm within the undergraduate experience can be defined by several sets of beliefs. Amongst them are that (a) Learning is pre-eminent; (b) learning requires action of the part of the learner and results in change to that learner; (c) similar types of learning occur throughout campus, both inside and outside the classroom; (d) these types of learning can be identified and articulated as learning outcomes; (f) and students engage in a series of behaviors in the process of achieving those learning outcomes (Pomerantz, 2006).

Literature reviews have observed a number of factors that influence student engagement. At the school level, size of school and teacher-student ratio matters (Fredricks et al., 2004). Within the classroom, a positive relationship with the teacher contributes to student engagement (Klem & Connell, 2014; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), as well as structure and clear teacher expectations. Students' engagement is fostered in learning environments to which student autonomy is supported, and that no punishment is also observed (Fredricks et al., 2004). On the other hand, Elffers (2011) mentioned that too much autonomy results in lower levels of students' engagement. Finally, engagement usually decreases, as students get older, particularly during high school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Klem & Connell, 2014).

Research interest in student engagement has grown over the years. Fredricks et al. (2004) reviewed the literature on engagement and proposed using engagement as a meta-construct to bring together different research viewpoints. However, they also concluded that inconsistencies were observed in the use of different concepts and terminology associated with the multidimensional construct of engagement. For the purpose of this study, there is a need to distinguish amongst three types of engagement as proposed by different researchers (e.g. Moreira, Vaz, Dias & Petracchi, 2009, Ryu & Lombardi, 2015). There is an increasing agreement that student engagement can be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct. The view that there are three primary dimensions or subtypes of student engagement—cognitive, emotional, and behavioral—is now widely embraced (Ryu & Lombardi, 2015). *Behavioral engagement* refers to consistency of effort, participation, attendance, homework and other desired academic behaviors. *Cognitive engagement* refers to investment in learning, depth of processing, and/or the use of self-regulated metacognitive strategies. *Emotional engagement* refers to students' affect and emotions in schools, such as interest, boredom, or anxiety.

In this study, the researchers are inclined to assess the extent to which behavioral engagement of university students is potentially influenced by factors such as students' attitude, academics' influences as well as the students' perceived behavioral control on knowledge and skills. The following section further explains the mechanics of these constructs based on Theory of Planned Behavior. Herewith, engagement is construed as a behavior that individuals aim to achieve within the university learning environment, and that could then potentially increase their academic performance if they are having positive learning engagement behavior at hand.

## 2.2. Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) symbolizes a theory that provides links between individual's beliefs and behavior. This concept was previously proposed by Ajzen (1991) on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). In improving the predictive power of TRA, few dimensions were added including perceived behavioural control (PBC). Following the inception, the extended framework of TRA was later known as Theory of Planned Behaviour. Until today, the TPB as illustrated in Figure 1.0 is regarded as one of the most predictive persuasion theories. It has been applied to examine the relationship among beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions and actual behavioral in various disciplines such as advertising, public relations, advertising campaigns and healthcare (Ajzen, 1991).

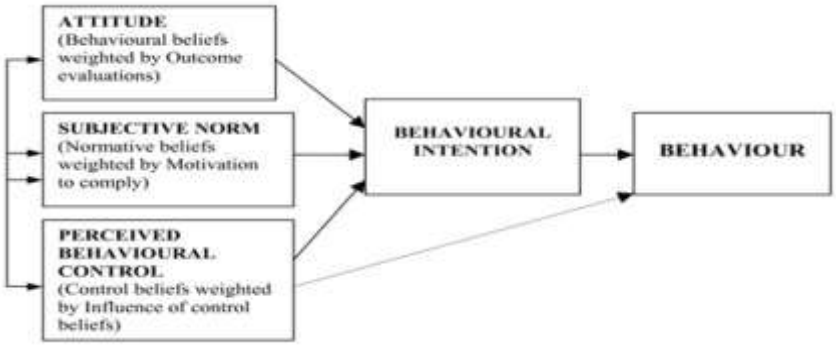



Fig. 1 – Theory of Planned Behaviour by Icek Ajzen (1991)

TPB states that attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, if put together may predict an individual's behavioral intentions and actual behaviors. For attitudes towards behavior, individual's positive or negative evaluation of self-performance of the particular behavior was fundamental. The concept reflects the degree to which performance of the behavior is positively or negatively valued. It is determined by the total set of accessible behavioral beliefs linking the behavior to various outcomes and other attributes. Ajzen (2002) stated that while subjective norm is used to test an individual's perception about a particular behavior, it is influenced by the decision of others who are considered important in his/her life. This dimension apparently examines how the individual decision is being affected by others' influence as opposed to making his or her own decision. Perceived behavioral control is an individual's perceived ease or difficulty of performing a said behavior. It is assumed that perceived behavioral control is determined by a set of accessible control beliefs (Ajzen, 1991).

The TPB further assumes that intention is the most important predictor of behavior. Intention is determined by attitude (the individual's positive or negative evaluation of the behavior), subjective norm (perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a behavior), and perceived behavioral control (PBC; perceived ease or difficulty of performing a behavior; also assumed to be a direct predictor of behavior). Attitude, subjective norm and PBC are informed by underlying behavioral, normative and control beliefs respectively. Relationships between these determinants imply that people's intention to behave in a certain way is supported by positive evaluation of such an activity, by perceived pressure to perform such behavior and by a subjective belief that there is an opportunity and available resources for such behavior.

2.2.1 Attitude (Students' Attitudinal Beliefs)

A complete explanation of human behavior must also take into account the bases for forming these major determinants. The entire model of the TPB thus includes beliefs, which rest behind each of the three major determinants. Exploration of these beliefs (behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs) requires specific observations. Addition of these beliefs in the TPB model enables the linkage of personal values and attitudes because people's attitudes are formed by specific beliefs about the attributes of a given object and individual evaluation. At the same time, it is assumed that the remaining variables (such as age, education, income, etc.) may influence people's beliefs. However, any inclusion of the background factors in the analysis needs to be justified by an additional theory that extends the standard planned behavior model.

In this context, students' attitudinal belief systems need to be thoroughly studied in an attempt to determine whether these beliefs may hold truth in predicting the engagement behavior. Schuetz (2008) found that a motivational belief and student agency act as determining factors in the acceptance of learning engagement. In this study, attitudinal beliefs are measured in such as way they are directly related to the said self-reported student engagement. Also, actual engagement is sought after in the context of a dependent variable.

2.2.2 Subjective Norm (Academics' Influence)

Subjective norm is the subjective perception of individuals (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and is the extent where particular behavior performance is supported or not supported by significant others. In entrepreneurial activities, subjected norm is commonly measured by the extent of supports given by closest one – family members, friends or colleagues (Li-an & Chen, 2009; Ajzen, 2001). It is likely the behavior will be performed if individuals believe that significant others want them to perform or if they feel that they should perform a behavior because their significant others are doing it (Sutter & Paulson, 2016). According to Mackay, White & Obst (2016), subjective norm is influenced by underlying beliefs (normative belief) of the approval expectation of significant others to perform any given behavior. It is also referring to perceived social pressure of performing or not behavior (Ho & Kuo, 2009).

It was reported that behavioral engagement of girls was more beneficial if they have a warm relationship with a teacher while the emotional engagement of boys was more harmful if they have conflict between student and teacher (Armchambault et al., 2017). Armchambault et al., (2017) found the importance of student-teacher relationship in fostering all students' engagement

in school. However, according to Baker, Grant & Morlock (2008) bad relationship such as conflict and disharmonious relationships resulted in decrease student engagement and classroom avoidance. Theron & Bitzer (2016) emphasized study success of university students was not dependent entirely on classroom teaching and information transfer, but also institutional level (in-class or out of-class learning) due to the "new generation" characteristics of students.

For students to get the best learning experience, lecturers are expected to teach and evaluate their teaching methods effectively (Ismail, Fakri, Mohammad, Nor, Ahmad & Yusoff, 2018). Ismail et al., (2018) used seven aspects of Teacher Behaviour Inventory (TBI), namely; organization, speech-pacing, clarity, enthusiasm, interaction, rapport and disclosure. These aspects were rated by the medical students to evaluate their lecturers teaching effectiveness. The highest rated were organization and speech-pacing, the lowest was the disclosure aspect while the other aspects attained satisfactory level. They also suggested improvement to some teaching behavior. De Jager & Bitzer (2013) emphasized that multiple factors influenced teaching in higher education. The factors include the characteristics of students and lecturers, disciplinary contexts, institutional cultures and teaching and learning approaches. They highlighted student feedback as an important indicator from other various methods such as peer ratings, self-evaluation, employer ratings and teaching portfolios to evaluate teaching effectiveness. According to De Jager & Bitzer (2013), student feedback on teaching and courses was considered simple and practical method to assess weak and strong teaching elements.

Teaching quality is one of the important factors for students' attrition and learning disinterest (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). To illustrate, weak students' engagement leads them to a change of university (Boyaci, Karacabey, Ozdere & Oz, 2018). According to Boyaci et al., (2018), students changed university because they argued to be given low quality lectures by instructors or research assistants. The low-quality lectures were due to teaching instructors and research resistants' lack of content knowledge, teaching skills, motivation and evaluation practices. Therefore, in this study, lecturers' teaching influence in the form of their teaching methodology is expected to have a significant influence on students' engagement behavior in learning development.

### 2.2.3 Perceived Behavioral Control (Knowledge and Skills)

Perceived behavioral control (PBC) was an extension of theory of reasoned action (TRA). It was subsequently included to form the seminal theory of planned behavior (TPB). In order to perform behaviour of interest, individuals will perceive its performance difficulty as well as ease, and reflect to past experiences reflections and resources (e.g. money, time, skills and co-operations of others) assumptions (Ho & Kou, 2009). PBC is derived from control beliefs (Ajzen, 2012) and refers to individual's perceived degree of difficulty to perform behavior and the abilities believed to perform behavior (Sutter & Paulson, 2016). PBC is described as the perceived probability of specific task performance success (Dinc & Budic, 2016).

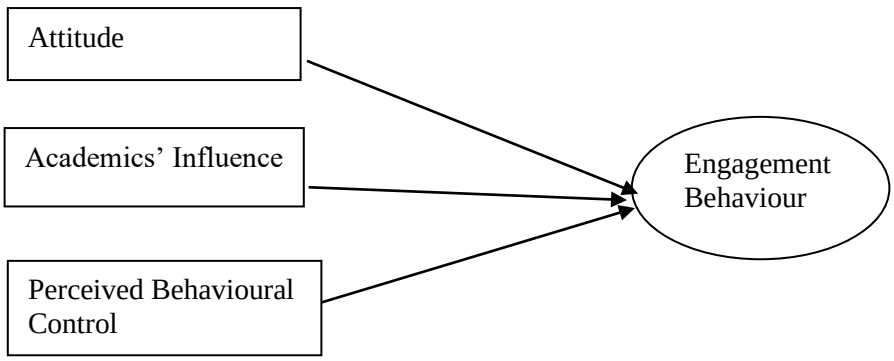
For competition purpose and market economy, potential employment needs people with appropriate international knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) (Prestwich & Thu-Mai, 2007; Stivers, Veliyath, Joyce & Adams, 2010). Eight managerial KSA were observed, that included business area knowledge and skills, communication skills, creativity / adaptability, ethics,

leadership, problem solving, teamwork and work habits. Nkhoma, Sriratanaviriyakul, Cong & Lam, (2014) used students course engagement questionnaire to examine engagement in skills, emotions, participations and performance and found out that there was a positive influenced on students' engagement in skills and emotions. Liu, Chen, Lin & Huang, (2017) suggested that sustained student's engagement in participatory learning programs and leveraged knowledge acquisition was due to principle remix practice.

The present study adapted Icek Ajzen's (1991) TPB as key determinants of university students' engagement behavior in the learning process. Several factors such as the students' attitudinal belief system, academics' influences as well as students' perceived control on knowledge and skills are hypothesized to affect university students learning engagement behavior. Several propositions are developed as follows:

H1 – Attitude significantly influences university students' engagement behavior in learning development.
H2 – Academics' influence significantly affects university students' engagement behavior in learning development.
H3 – Perceived behavioural control on knowledge and skills significantly affects university students' engagement behavior in learning development.

Fig. 2 – Theoretical model of the study




## 3.0 Research Methodology

This study proposes an inferential reasoning research methodology to which the said theoretical model will be tested using a quantitative method of data collection. In terms of survey procedure, self-administered survey questionnaires would be distributed to 300 university students from the Faculty of Business and Management at a local public university in Selangor, Malaysia. Quota sampling technique is used since the study aims to focus on the 14 undergraduate academic business program disciplines within the said Faculty. All item measurements of the identified constructs would be adapted from previous research and adopted in this study. Descriptive and inferential statistics would be carried out using both SPSS Version 26.0 and SmartPLS SEM 3.0 statistical procedures.

## 4.0 Expected Contributions

This study holds potential contribution towards new knowledge generation towards understanding the learning engagement behavioral outcomes. It is also expected to provide outcomes to several key stakeholders mainly the HEIs, and also policy makers. By assuring active learning engagement amongst university students, it can assist towards the nation building of employable graduates that are knowledgeable, skillful and resilient in embracing the Industry 4.0 Revolution.

## Acknowledgments

The researchers wish to acknowledge an appreciation to Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Alam, Selangor, MALAYSIA (Selangor Branch Campus) for the approved research grant, DUCS [Grant No: 600—UITMSEL (P1.5/4) (037/2018)].

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