

# Perceived risk and sensitivity and their influence on expatriate performance during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID 19 pandemic has changed the way that global businesses function, and has been the driving force behind a reevaluation of the factors that influence expatriate performance. This study empirically examines the mediating effects of perceived risk and sensitivity in the relationship between self-initiated expatriates support mechanisms (perceived organizational support and host-country national support) and expatriate performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data from 114 expatriates working and residing in Malaysia between March 27 and May 14, 2020 was analyzed using structural equation modelling. The results from the study indicate that host country national support significantly influences expatriate performance indirectly through expatriate engagement, while perceived risk and sensitivity moderate the relationship between perceived organizational support and host country national support through expatriate engagement. The integration of factors that influence work performance during a pandemic, such as perceived risk and sensitivity, leads to a more concise view of expatriation. Organizations need to be more prepared in terms of risk induced scenarios, and propose suitable intervention programs to mitigate the potential negative outcomes due to a pandemic.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19, expatriate engagement, expatriate performance, perceived risk, sensitivity to pandemic

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The current global pandemic COVID-19 has posed a significant threat to the human workforce. Due to globalization and large in-flows of expatriates, the effective management of international projects during the pandemic is increasingly important. According to a recent MERCER survey, 96% of the companies are continuing with their expatriate assignments during the COVID-19 pandemic, which indicates that multinational corporations (MNCs) need to retain foreign talent (Mercer, 2021). However, the uncertainty associated with timing, origin and virulence of pan-

demic strains, and the possibility of unprecedented spread of contagious and deadly diseases such as COVID-19, has caused increased fear, stress, and anxiety among expatriates (Savage et al., 2020).

Malaysia is one of the prime developing nations that require expatriates to fill in the void of skilled employees and enhance economic progression (Sultana et al., 2019). Additionally, stringent regulations due to the offset of unemployment within the nation has increased barriers to recruitment of foreign workers, which is predicted to have a negative impact on the growing economy (Sharif, 2020). Moreover, during the enhanced movement control

order (March 27th, 2020–May 14th, 2020) expatriates were prohibited from entering Malaysia, which sent out a “negative message” as locals were permitted entry (Noor, 2020).

The PR and anxiety faced by expatriates is likely to impact behavioral outcomes. Drawing upon conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 1989), perceived risk (PR) is recognized as a factor which could lower engagement and performance during adversities. During the pandemic, such challenges are multiplied due to safety concerns and possible prevention on travel to home country, as predicted by COR theory those who experience heightened psychological resource loss are likely to become more distressed and posit negative behavioral outcomes (Hobfoll, 2011). Prior research provides scant mechanisms to allay these stresses and anxieties whilst maintaining and enhancing expatriate job performance. We, therefore, set out to address this critical research gap.

The requirement for MNCs to gather specific knowledge on potential hazards and risks that could be developed during the term of their international assignment is crucial (Bader et al., 2019). Standard operating procedures and management tactics need to be recognized and implemented. MNCs that implement supporting practices enhance expatriate’s commitment and perception of justice towards their organization and induce higher levels of performance (Wu & Ang, 2011).

Studies have demonstrated a lack in career support as one of the significant reasons for expatriate failure (Selmer & Luring, 2012; Stahl et al., 2012; van der Heijden et al., 2009). Support becomes pertinent at the time of the pandemic whereby uncertainty induced scenarios makes an expatriate more reliant on their organizations to assist and support them. In addition, host-country national (HCN) support is equally important in the expatriate management process (Bruning et al., 2012).

Given the lack of home community support expatriates are most likely to turn towards HCNs for social and informational support. Many studies have determined that HCN support not only enhances adjustments of expatriates but reduces negative impediments of the international assignments (Mahajan & De Silva, 2012). However, there remain discrepancies in results on the effectiveness of HCNs in influencing expatriate outcome as studies have garnered both positive and negative impact of HCN support (Bruning et al., 2012).

A key, yet relatively ignored factor related to expatriate job performance, is the extent to which expatriates are engaged within their organization abroad (Selmer & Luring, 2014). An effective preparedness strategy to retain talent must affirm job engagement (Sundaray, 2011). Unfortunately, the role of engagement has not received appropriate attention despite its grave implication on expatriate outcomes.

Work engagement has been associated recently with increased levels of task performance, organization citizenship behavior and client satisfaction (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). In this view, we propound the need of enhancing the potential comprehension of engagement and its influence on perceived support and expatriate performance (EP) within the scope of MNCs during unprecedented times. As suggested in the literature, employees with high-level of work engagement have the propensity to exploit “untapped opportunities” to ensure organizational success (Afsar et al., 2020; Rich et al., 2010). Therefore, we expect that expatriates with convincing job engagement will increase their job performance significantly.

Costs associated with under-performance will not just impact an MNC, but also upon the expatriate (Lee & Sukoco, 2008; McCaughey & Burning, 2005). Empirical studies that devolve into supportive tactics for expatriates during the pandemic are non-existent. Several studies have analyzed the predictors of EP (Che Rose et al., 2010; Lee & Sukoco, 2008; Morris & Robie, 2001; Wu & Ang, 2011). Despite this, the existent literature on EP, the issues involving underperformance and disengagement are yet to be explored nuancedly (Andresen et al., 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2009).

Our study’s research model is based on expatriates in Malaysia. Malaysia has achieved significant rapid economic growths and internalization in their markets (Kana, 2019). Yet, the current removal of expatriate jobs prior to the pandemic and an increase in unemployment rate due to the pandemic could trigger higher stressors for expatriates that could adversely impact organizational personnel and performance (Nathan, 2021).

To contribute to the research gap mentioned above, our research questions are:

- RQ1** What role does expatriate engagement play in predicting expatriate performance during a pandemic?
- RQ2** How severely do perceived risk and sensitivity to pandemic impact the relationship between sources of support and expatriate performance?

Thus, the contribution of the study is twofold.

First, the study aims to expand the knowledge of expatriate engagement (EE) within the international arena and its impact on performance. Within recent studies, researchers have built upon “positive psychology movement” and garnered significant interest within the construct of EE. At present, EE studies have focused on antecedents and attitudinal outcomes of EE (Ramalu & Subramaniam, 2019; Selmer & Luring, 2015; Selmer & Luring, 2012). COR theory postulates a significant personal and environmental capacity is required to succeed at engagement, stressful situation can deter engagement to meet survival demands

which can impede desire to achieve organizational goals (Hobfoll, 2011). The depletion of resource reservoir within an expatriate weakens protection against resource loss. COR theory emphasis interventions such as, engagement and resilience, are necessary to promote sustained work (Hobfoll, 2011). The link between engagement and positive attitudes needs further investigation (Arokiasamy, 2021). An engaged individual is more likely to develop more resources within the environment and invest in seeking for support to replace lost resources this leads to productive coping mechanism (Alarcon et al., 2011).

Second, we contribute to the literature on risk induced sentiments of expatriates by examining PR and sensitivity to pandemic (SP). It addresses the loss of energetical resources leading to resource loss for example in the form of disengagement and underperformance. It is critical to observe whether expatriates with most resource provision are able to thrive and overcome negative sentiments by maximizing their fit with the environment (Halbesleben et al., 2014). We further contribute to the development of COR theory in terms of extensively comprehending organizational psychology during a pandemic in an emerging economy context as theories hold its worth in different economies (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) offers an extensive theoretical basis to comprehend the impact of assessment on emotions and performance by taking in a focus on individuals. COR theory suggests that a human being's prime motivation is to build, protect, and foster their resource pools. Loss of resources leaves an individual more vulnerable and in turn negatively impacts ongoing resource challenges (Hobfoll, 2002). In the case of expatriates, a loss of social support (SS) (such as emotional and practical help from family, friends, or neighbors) and lack of knowledge on services (such as medical or psychological care) could postulate inevitable psychological stress reaction. An organization's ability to recognize an expatriate's depleted resources and developing mechanisms to reinstate the lost resources and enable recovery is pertinent during the pandemic (Hobfoll, 2011).

The CEO Pulse survey 2020 indicates 75% of companies are providing the same support to the expatriates as to their host country counterparts, this could deteriorate performance significantly as expatriates are placed away from their home countries and disassociated from their family and friends (Remick, 2021). As per COR theory expatriates are under more strain and may find their resources inadequate. Expatriates shall look towards other individuals "to offer the resources they lack, bolster their flag-

ging resources or remove them from the stressful circumstances" (Buchwald, 2010, p.286). Additionally, the threat of resource loss has been negatively related to various forms of job performance (Andresen et al., 2014; Frieder et al., 2015; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). Bearing in mind the foundations of COR, when expatriates are uncertain about their future with stringent government laws and barrier to entry, the resulting feeling of risk heightens. This leads to depletion of resources causing a negative psychological frame of mind (Nisar et al., 2021).

A lack of performance has been identified as one of the major outcomes of inadequate support and adjustment (Araci, 2015). Job performance is the individual's ability to utilize their knowledge, abilities, skills, and motivation in attaining a prescribed job role behavior (Campbell & Smith, 2018; Che Rose et al., 2010). Support from both organization and HCNs have been deemed as essential during the international assignments to minimize uncertainty of the expatriate and enhance adjustment levels (Bashir, 2012; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007; Mahajan & Toh, 2014; Takeuchi et al., 2009; Varma et al., 2016; Wu & Ang, 2011). Additionally, the current study investigates the nature of working conditions in a hostile environment due to COVID-19 pandemic, which may negatively influence on the working attitude. Epidemics of infectious disease are now becoming a regular part of the global landscape over the past quarter-century. Expatriates who are under-prepared or maladjusted could face higher fear, stress, anxiety, depression, and irritability which would potentially lead to difficulty in concentration in work (Reade & Lee, 2012). The current study postulates a need to manage people during pandemics and attempts to gain an understanding of potential support tactics that could reduce fear and induce effective performance.

### 2.1 | Research framework and hypothesis

Exhibit 1 shows the conceptual framework of the present study. Perceived organizational support (POS), Host country national support (HCN) are considered as independent variables. EE as a mediating variable while PR and SP are moderating variables. EP is taken as the dependent variable. POS has been defined as the employees' global beliefs that the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). HCNs are considered strategic resources in habilitating expatriate to their new environment (Sokro & Pillay, 2019). In addition, gender, age, and experience of the expatriates are considered as the control variables. EE refers to an individual's ability to connect with one's work energetically and effectively (Schaufeli et al., 2002). PR is determined by the individual's reaction to risk associated with COVID-19

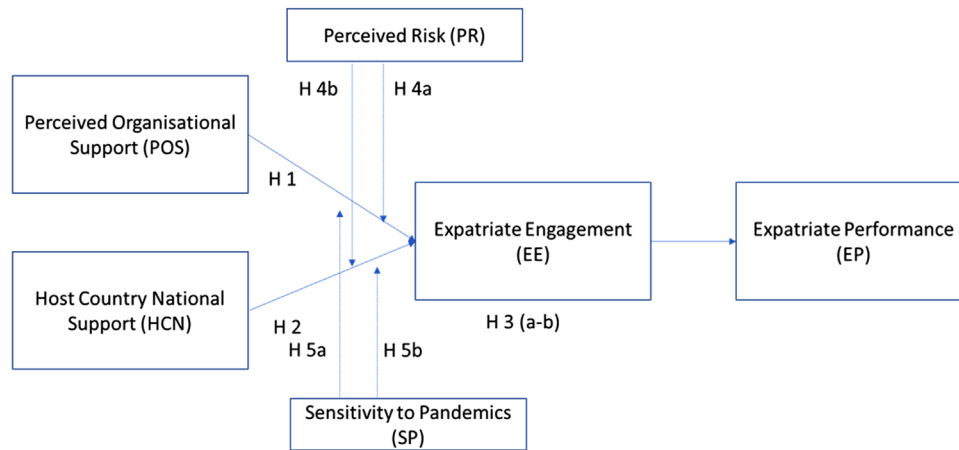


EXHIBIT 1 Conceptual research framework

(Attema et al., 2021). Sensitivity to the pandemic is the level of deeper cognitions which can ignite mental stressors during COVID-19 (Warden et al., 2021). EP is determined by the degree to which an expatriate is able to achieve his or her assignment objectives successfully (Varma et al., 2020).

## 2.2 | Perceived organizational support as a predictor of expatriate engagement

Support from the home or host country is inferred to by an employee as to the extent an organization values their efforts and cares about their well-being (van der Laken et al., 2016). POS is critical more so in endangered countries or risky situations such as the ongoing pandemic (Walter et al., 2011). Prior research has implied POS tends to lower employee's stress and impacts well-being (Bader & Berg, 2014). POS enables expatriates to cope effectively with novel demands of the jobs produced by COVID-19 (Eisenberger et al., 2020). An integration of POS with COR indicates MNCs need to invest in fueling expatriate resources to further prevent and restore the resources lost during COVID-19. A recent meta-analysis by Saks (2019) deliberated POS has one of the key drivers of job engagement as employees who are provided with opportunities alongside care and concern for well-being are expected to demonstrate high levels of engagement. Bader and Berg (2014) examined the impact of POS and SS in tourism-endangered countries and work attitudes. Results indicated effective POS significantly influenced valuable expatriate outcomes. POS is said to increase the speed and magnitude of performance through mediators such as satisfaction, commitment, and adjustment (Lee & Kartika, 2014; van der Laken et al., 2016). Expatriates who lack valuable resources such as family, well-being and a general sense of purpose are

more likely to conserve remaining resources (Whitman et al., 2014). This could reflect in lower engagement and performance (Ng & Feldman, 2013).

In turn, the support expatriates obtain from their organizations affects their loyalty, commitment, and performance in the organization, in a positive way (Horst, 2017; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). In a study by Chen and Shaffer (2017) on 147 self-initiated expatriates (SIE) career and adjustment POS highly contributed to autonomous motivation which generated higher organizational embeddedness. Expatriates with superior resources are less susceptible to resource loss and more proficient in orchestrating resource gain (Westman et al., 2004). However, Trembath and Hansen (2019) on 163 expatriate academic revealed inadequacy in terms of communication of support and mistrust on sources of support. Takeuchi (2010) stressed on the lack of previous research studying direct impact of POS on EP without critically examining specific mediators that could facilitate performance. As expatriates continue to work within unparalleled times, they require resources such as finance, counselling, supervision, and consistent communication to adequately perform within a risk induced environment (Bader & Berg, 2013). Thus, the study hypothesizes the following:

**H1** Perceived organizational support positively influences expatriate engagement

## 2.3 | Host-country national support as a predictor of expatriate engagement

Researchers have critically studied HCNs role in expatriate adjustment within the host nation (Varma et al., 2016; Wang & Varma, 2017). Previous studies have researched upon two forms of support HCNs could provide to better

assist expatriates: informational and SS. SS consists of non-work-related assistance such as provision on information on how to ease “work-life” balance and inclination to assist expatriate with personal problems (Farh et al., 2010). Informational support is the provision of job-related information such as organizational culture, norms, practices, policies (Mahajan & Toh, 2014; Sonesh & DeNissi, 2015). While some studies have analyzed HCNs perception of similarity to expatriate having an influence on support (Singh et al., 2019; Varma et al., 2016) other researchers have glanced upon HCN categorization of expatriate (Varma et al., 2011). HCNs critical role in socializing with expatriates by sharing valuable role information (RI) and SS during the assignment contributes to higher adjustment of expatriates in the host nation (Sokro & Pillay, 2019; Sonesh & DeNissi, 2015; Toh & DeNisi, 2007; Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2015). Prior research by Malek et al. (2013) on expatriates working in Malaysian MNCs revealed HCN social support was not related to adjustment due to the collectivistic nature of Malaysian society. Thus, an expatriate’s work attitude in the host nation is largely influenced by the external environment (Bader, 2015). Especially having close knit and trustworthy social relations could be helpful in terms of emotional support and increased coping (Andresen et al., 2014; Thoits, 2011).

HCN support is essential when facing a pandemic as it represents a critical resource in line with COR theory it provides an expatriate personnel with increased resource base such as companionship, support, knowledge, and information sharing. Additionally, expatriates and family members tend to “suffer” from hindered relationships and the sense of isolation is heightened during a pandemic which is likely to lower engagement and focus on work. Expatriates shall try to maintain their level of resource as per conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) by substituting their losses and engaging in information sharing with HCNs (Bader et al., 2017). Thus, these support mechanisms enable the expatriate to protect, replenish and reinvest in personal resources within their environment (Halbesleben et al., 2011). HCNs supportive behavior is likely to lower chances of disengagement and foster motivation to focus on work despite, unprecedented circumstances. Given the detrimental effect of COVID-19 on humanity worldwide, expatriates shall be turning to HCNs for SS. HCNs role as an advisor is ever so critical when the expatriate is dealing with an unfamiliar and difficult situation in the host country (Toh & DeNisi, 2007; Varma et al., 2016). In this vein, lower support from HCNs could lead to lower performance (Andresen et al., 2014). There is a greater need to raise awareness on the potential benefit of HCN-expatriate interaction (Bakel & Salzbrunner, 2018). It is critical to examine whether provision of HCNs social support enhances EP during this unpre-

dictable and risky situation. Thus, the study hypothesizes that:

**H2** Host-country national support positively influences expatriate engagement

## 2.4 | The mediating role of expatriate engagement

Domestic studies have derived a significant mediating role of job or employee engagement in the relationships between relational antecedents and task performance (Xanthopoulou et al., 2008), organizational support (Rich et al., 2010), and trust (Chughtai & Buckley, 2011). Prior research suggests engaged employees are goal-oriented and pursue their objective both cognitively and emotionally which fosters increase cooperation with teammates and effectively leveraging support from an organization (Nazir & Islam, 2017). Gupta et al. (2015) studied the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between job resources and employee performance, where they derived a significant influence of employee engagement on performance. Engaged employees tend to view work as fun and challenging rather than stressful (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008) which is viewed as a valuable resource to address loss of resources in risk induced work environments (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, 2002; Zhou et al., 2018). Dajani (2015) examined the effect of the employee engagement on both job performance and organizational commitment and discovered that employee engagement has the most effect on overall work performance. Moreover, Bakker and Xanthopoulou (2008) suggests a crossover between engaged workers and enhanced communication with co-workers leading to increased performance. Highly engaged expatriates are more likely to invest in resources to protect from resource loss and enhancing coping mechanisms (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Although a number of studies have used expatriate adjustment and commitment as a mediator for performance outcomes, very few cross-cultural literatures have looked into EE as a potential mediator (Selmer & Luring, 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2009). When employees are motivated, they tend to reciprocate the support received through increased performance (Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Hence, referring to the above related discussions, the following hypothesis is developed.

**H3a** Expatriate engagement mediates the relationship between perceived organizational support and expatriate performance during the pandemic.

**H3b** Expatriate engagement mediates the relationship between host country national support and expatriate performance during the pandemic.

## 2.5 | The moderating role of perceived risk

Within the current study, we define PR as uncertainty and negative consequences of the loss associated with the ongoing pandemic (Yıldırım & Güler, 2020). Nationwide lockdown, quarantine, isolation has resulted in escalation of fear, anxiety, and PR. Currently, PR towards COVID-19 in the public is high and exceeds an individual's acceptable level of risk causing strong reactions through risk amplifications (Wang et al., 2020). PR in evaluating the current environment, involves two factors: severity and probability (Langer, 1975). Probability estimates psychological components like emotions, illusion control and the tendency to consider that bad events will happen to others, and severity estimates the perception of consequences level of the disease, like death and illness (Langer, 1975; Sridhar et al., 2016). From a COR perspective, expatriates are more likely to be confronted with loss of resources such as lowered communication, insecurity about current job position and lack of feedback. The less resources expatriates have at their disposal the more likely they opt for maladaptive coping (Alarcon et al., 2011). Additionally, individuals who are not able to recognize information that would aid them are likely to feel a loss of control which will lead to higher negative consequences rather than the disease itself (Wang et al., 2020).

An MNCs actions in any traumatic event remains vital for managing an outbreak, especially in the initial stage, when there is no treatment or vaccination available. The moderating perspective suggests PR is a strong influencer between support mechanisms and behavioral outcomes. There is no guarantee POS and HNC is translated into positive motivational behavior towards the organization (Alfes et al., 2013). Several studies have demonstrated that risk perceptions related to any threat, negatively influence job engagement, job satisfaction, job motivation, and organizational commitment (e.g., Bader & Berg, 2013; Malik & Garg, 2017; Reade & Lee, 2012). Work engagement of any employee, be an expatriate or local, shares some conceptual similarity with work attitudes (Mauno et al., 2007), which involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components (Hobfoll et al., 2011), and in case of any PR, they naturally take a careful approach, diverting their thoughts and attention, to confirm protection against any sort of loss. As a result, this affects their work engagement and performance (Hobfoll et al., 2011). Thus, the following hypothesis is developed:

**H4a** Perceived risk during pandemic moderates the relationship between perceived organizational support and expatriate job engagement.

**H4b** Perceived risk during pandemic moderates the relationship between host-country national support and expatriate job engagement.

## 2.6 | The moderating role of sensitivity to pandemic

The threat of a pandemic is relatively different and unpredictable in contrast typical stressors that impact an EP. As with any unexpected stress the threat of a pandemic is bound to increase stress and induce negative emotions amongst expatriates. Similar to sensory processing sensitivity framework, 20% of individuals that have higher sensitivity possess deeper cognitions (could be unconsciously) which lead to higher emotional or stress reactivity in response to changes in internal or external environmental stimuli (Aron & Aron, 1997). In addition, to living in a constant worry of being infected plausibly in the host nation, the increased fear of loved ones who are in the home nation is bound to create a stimulus to stress consequences. Individuals that are more sensitive to unpredictable developments in the host nation will be less resilient and are more likely to crumble under the pressures of an unexpected scenario. In line with COR theory highly sensitive expatriates shall face lowered engagement and are less likely to cope with unfavorable work conditions (Hobfoll, 1989). COVID-19 posits a greater threat due to the unpredictability of the spread and dangerousness of the virus (McKay et al., 2020). Expatriates that are highly sensitive are likely to lack confidence in their resources and are more susceptible to apprehension and threat appraisals when confronted with high work demands. To protect their resources expatriates may withhold their remaining resources and reduce work engagement (Zhou et al., 2018). Thus, although POS and HCN largely influence engagement SP may play an important role on whether an individual's support mechanism is translated into motivational behavioral actions. Determining the impact psychological risk factors is essential in comprehensively acknowledging various approaches for management to enhance expatriate support. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

**H5a** Sensitivity to pandemic moderates the relationship between perceived organizational support and expatriate job engagement.

**H5b** Sensitivity to pandemic moderates the relationship between host-country national support and expatriate job engagement.

### 3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for the current study was collected from expatriates based in Malaysian multinational companies, working in the Southeast Asian region of Malaysia. The period of March 18<sup>th</sup> and April 2020, during the peak of COVID-19 pandemic, was considered as an appropriate time to collect the data. A structured survey was developed through extensive review of the expatriate literature. A total of 500 questionnaires were sent to MNCs based in the states of Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Penang. Malaysian Business Directory and search engine enabled the researchers to contact HR departments. Follow-up letters were sent to the HR departments of MNCs to encourage expatriates in the completion of the primary survey. About 114 (22.8%) responses to the questionnaire survey were valid and usable. A response rate of 22.8% was possible because of the support extended by HR officials of the MNCs despite the turbulence caused by the pandemic.

#### 3.1 | Expatriate performance

Contextual performance refers to the expatriate's performance on aspects of the job that go beyond specific job duties but are essential to performing well in an expatriate assignment, such as establishing good relationships with HCNs and adapting to the foreign facility's business customs (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004). Thus, we included task and contextual performance as measures of job performance was measured using a nine-item Likert scale 1—5, derived from Kraimer and Wayne (2004). Respondents were asked to rate their answers based on a five-point Likert scale (1) "very poor" to (5) "very outstanding." Sample items include "I am able to succeed in overall job performance." The current study derived a Cronbach alpha of 0.896 similar to previous studies (Heijden et al., 2009; Kawai & Strange, 2014; Wu & Ang, 2011). The mean score for EP was 4.3 (SD = 0.55).

EE was measured utilizing a thirteen-item scale adapted from Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The UWES consists of three dimensions; Vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance and pride and absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work. Work engagement is a superordinate, second order (latent) construct in the sense that it is manifested by its three dimensions. An analysis of three dimensions absorption, vigor and dedication was measured and scored on a five-point scale. The engagement items are consistently similar as those of MBI-GS, however the UWES has been

"successfully psychometrically validated" in the Netherlands (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Sample items consist of "I always persevere, when it gets tough." The current study consolidated the three sub-dimensions of engagement with a resulting alpha of 0.919 and a mean score of 3.96 (SD = 0.63).

POS was measured using twelve indicators that represent three sub-dimensions: adjustment, financial and career, and was adapted from Kraimer and Wayne (2004). An integration of the expatriate research suggests that POS may be multidimensional such that adjustment support, career support, and financial support are distinct dimensions of global POS that differentially relate to employee outcomes (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004). Sample items consisted of "Help is available within the company whenever I have questions or concerns about living in a foreign country." Responses are measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The Cronbach's alpha of the construct was 0.955. The mean score for POS was 3.77 (SD = 0.87).

HCN support was measured using RI, which consisted of seven measurement items assessing the extent to which HCN was willing to provide support to expatriates with information on culturally acceptable behavior and norms expected from the organization developed by Morrison (1993) and SS, which was measured through a five-item measure developed by Caplan (1987) to assess the extent to which HCNs were willing to ease co-workers into the social aspects of an organization. Sample items consisted of "My subordinates provide information on what the company values and expects." The Cronbach's alpha estimate for internal reliability was 0.896 which falls in line with previous studies (Toh & Srinivas, 2012; Varma et al., 2011) with the mean score of 3.82 (SD = 0.61).

Sensitivity to Pandemic (SP) Due to the novelty of the virus sensitivity specifically to the virus was measured by adapting 11 indicators from Buhr and Dugas (2002) intolerance of uncertainty (IU) scale which consists of 27 items. The IU construct was derived to be ubiquitous with scores comparable to anxiety disorder and depression similar to feelings of sensitivity (Khawaja & Yu, 2010). IU can be defined as the tendency of an individual to refuse the occurrence of negative events and thus, are more intolerable to ambiguity of the situation as created by COVID-19 (Buhr & Dugas, 2002). Sample items consisted of "The pandemic keeps me from sleeping soundly." The Cronbach Alpha estimate resulted in 0.892. The average score of the construct was 3.27 (SD = 0.78).

PR adapting from the work of Bults et al. (2011) and Kwok et al. (2020) PR related to COVID-19 was measured in two psychological segments: (i) perceived susceptibility and (ii) perceived severity. Perceived susceptibility was measured by two question items, referring to how

EXHIBIT 2 Profile of respondents ( $n = 114$ )

Demographic variables	Values	No. of respondents	%
Gender	Male	83	72.8
	Female	30	26.3
	I choose not to answer	1	0.9
Age	18–27	26	22.8
	28–37	60	52.6
	38–47	15	13.2
	48–57	8	7
	58–67	4	3.5
	68 and above	1	0.9
Current relationship status	Single	51	44.7
	Married	63	55.3
Number of children in your family	0	62	54.4
	1–2	45	39.5
	3–4	4	3.5
	5–6	2	1.8
	Above 6	1	0.9
Occupational positions	Non-managerial	26	22.8
	Lower management	17	14.9
	Middle management	53	46.5
	Top management	16	14
	Top and middle management	2	1.8
Length of stay in current job	Less than 1 year	23	20.2
	1–2	37	32.5
	3–4	17	14.9
	Over 5 years	37	32.5
Have you faced any risks in your previous assignment?	Yes	6	5.3
	No	103	90.4
	N/A	5	4.4

likely or unlikely one considered oneself (his/her families) would be infected with COVID-19 after preventive measure was taken. Perceived severity measured the symptoms' seriousness caused by COVID-19, by four question items. Responses were captured with a five-point Likert scale. Two questions from perceived severity were excluded. Sample items measured "Chances of having COVID-19 cured?" The Cronbach Alpha estimate resulted in 0.700. The PR mean score was 3.44 ( $SD = 0.52$ ).

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Descriptive statistics

As seen in Exhibit 2, among the 114 survey respondents, 83 (72.8%) were males, and 31 (27.2%) were females. Most

of the respondents 60 (52.6%) belong to 28–37 years age group followed by 26 (22.8%) in 18–27 years and 15 (13.2%) in 38–47 years. More than half of the respondents were married 63 (55.3%), and the rest were single 51 (44.7%). 62 (54.4%) expatriates do not have any children, followed by 45 (39.5%) had 1–2 children. In the middle level management, there were 53 (46.5%) positions and top managerial position were about 18 (15.8%). Regarding the length of stay in the current job, 1–2 years and over 5 years each had 37 (32.5%) respondents.

Exhibit 3 provides the correlation matrix along with the mean and standard deviation values of the latent variables developed in the framework. EE has a positive correlation of 0.517 on EP and is highly statistically significant. Followed by HCN on EP which is 0.430 while POS on EP is 0.264 and these correlations are statistically significant. SP has a negative correlation on EP (-0.166) while PR has



EXHIBIT 3 Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis ( $n = 114$ )

Descriptive statistics			Correlation matrix						
Latent variable	Mean	Std. Dev	POS	HCN	PR	SP	EE	EP	VIF
POS	3.77	0.87	1						1.647
HCN	3.82	0.61	0.595 <sup>a</sup>	1					1.630
PR	3.44	0.52	0.056	0.118	1				–
SP	3.27	0.78	–0.078	0.016	0.357 <sup>a</sup>	1			–
EE	3.96	0.63	0.428 <sup>a</sup>	0.418 <sup>a</sup>	0.089	–0.090	1		–
EP	4.3	0.55	0.264 <sup>a</sup>	0.430 <sup>a</sup>	0.108	–0.166	0.517 <sup>a</sup>	1	–

<sup>a</sup>Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

EXHIBIT 4 Results of the measurement model ( $n = 114$ )

Fit index	Cut-off point	Initial measurement model	Modified measurement model
CMIN/DF	$\leq 3.00$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999)	2.117	1.076
GFI	$\geq 0.90$ (Hooper et al., 2008)	0.584	0.900
AGFI	$\geq 0.80$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999)	0.540	0.815
NFI	$\geq 0.90$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999)	0.638	0.900
CFI	$\geq 0.90$ (Hair et al., 2014)	0.767	0.990
RMSEA	$\leq 0.08$ (Hair et al., 2014)	0.099	0.026

Abbreviations: CMIN/DF, minimum discrepancy function divided by degrees of freedom; GFI, goodness of fit index; AGFI, adjusted goodness of fit index; NFI, normed fit index; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation.

a positive correlation on EP (0.108); however, both these correlations are insignificant. The variation inflation factors (VIF) for the independent variables (POS & HCN) and mediating variable (EE) are below the value of 5 which indicate that there is no multicollinearity among these variables.

## 4.2 | Measurement model of SEM

For the present study, the structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed using SPSS AMOS 26.0. The measurement model and the goodness of fit were determined before testing the hypotheses of the proposed framework. Results of CMIN/DF, GFI, AGFI, NFI, CFI, and RMSEA were tabulated in Exhibit 4 for the initial and final measurement model. The thumb rules of these measures are given as the cut-off points. The fit index for the initial measurement model were CMIN/DF = 2.117, GFI = 0.584, AGFI = 0.540, NFI = 0.638, CFI = 0.767, and RMSEA = 0.099. This shows that the model is not fit with the observed data. Hence, modification index was used to obtain the final iteration measures (CMIN/DF = 1.076, GFI = 0.900, AGFI = 0.815, NFI = 0.900, CFI = 0.990, RMSEA = 0.026). Interestingly, no question item was removed after using the modification index, and the root mean square

error is zero in the final iterative process which indicates that the data fits well to the SEM.

## 4.3 | Hypotheses testing using structural equation modeling

For the analysis of the SEM, control variables namely gender, age, and previous experience of expatriates were included to better understand the significance of the model variables. Exhibit 5 reveals the direct effects of the relationship in the proposed conceptual framework in Exhibit 1. HCN and POS have a significant positive relationship on EE. This indicates that H1 ( $\beta = 0.266$ ,  $T = 2.783$ ,  $p < .004$ ) and H2 ( $\beta = 0.376$ ,  $t = 2.732$ ,  $p < .007$ ) are supported.

In Exhibit 6, the mediating effect of EE is tested on the relationship between the independent variables (POS & HCN) and dependent variable (EP). These indirect effects are found to be statistically significant. The indirect effect is found to be positively statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.078$ ,  $t = 2.229$ ,  $p = .007$ ), thus, H3a is supported which indicates that EE is fully mediating. On the other hand, EE is also mediating the relationship between HCN and EP which indicates that H6b is supported with EE as a partial mediator ( $\beta = 0.110$ ,  $t = 1.692$ ,  $p = .007$ ).

EXHIBIT 5 Results of structural equation modeling—direct effects

Hypotheses	Path	Beta	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	POS → EE	0.266	0.096	2.783*	.005	Supported
H2	HCN → EE	0.376	0.138	2.732*	.006	Supported

\* $p < .01$ 

EXHIBIT 6 Results of structural equation modeling—indirect effects

Hypotheses	Path	Beta	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Decision
H3a	POS → EE → EP	0.078	0.035	2.229**	.007	Supported
H3b	HCN → EE → EP	0.110	0.065	1.692*	.007	Supported

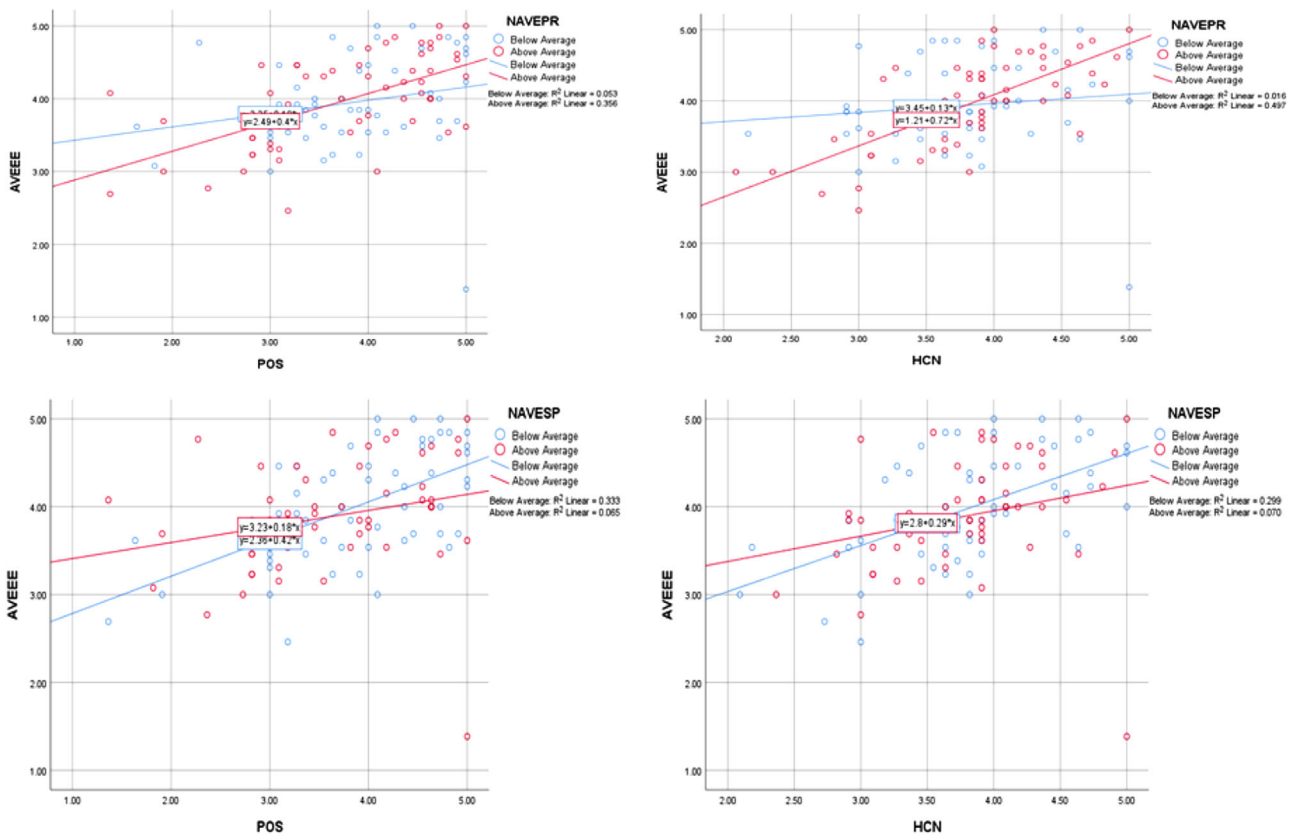
\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ ,

EXHIBIT 7 Moderating effects of perceived risk and sensitivity to pandemics

#### 4.4 | Moderating effects

In this study, PR and SP are considered as the moderating variables (Exhibit 7) to study the relationship between the independent variables (POS & HCN) and the mediating variable (EE), for the partial model proposed in the conceptual framework in Exhibit 1. Interestingly, when the PR score is above average, EE increases. The scores of POS and

HCN are above four on the five-point Likert scale. Thus, the hypotheses H4 (a-b) are supported. On the other hand, when the SP is below average, EE decreases as the scores of POS and HCN are above four on the five-point scale which clearly indicate that H6(a-b) are supported. Understandably, PR and SP are strongly moderating in the opposite directions with regard to expatriate job engagement as is evident in Exhibit 7.

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The execution of management control across border is essential for MNCs (Sageder & Feldbauer-Durstmüller, 2019). The evolution and repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis is still unfolding, thus exploring its implications on expatriate management could help MNCs build a strong undeterred talent pipeline to ensure effectiveness and revitalize world economy (Liu et al., 2020). Results indicate POS has a significant impact ( $\beta = 0.266$ ,  $t = 2.783$ ,  $p < .004$ ) on EE. Supporting the principle of reciprocity, when expatriates derive support, they are more likely to commit and engage in achieving organizational goals. The results of the study support prior domestic literature (Rhoades & Eisdneberger, 2002). POS from the company will induce higher well-being and reciprocity which field expatriates to achieve organizational goals despite the unprecedented circumstances. Within the context of changing psychological contracts, organizations that provide supportive policies are likely to replace lost resources and enhance resources investments of global employees within the organization (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The significant findings and results indicate that informational and SS from HCNs ( $\beta = 0.376$ ,  $t = 2.732$ ,  $p < .007$ ) play a crucial role in enhancing the expatriates engagement. These findings are in similar lines of previous researchers who have emphasized HCN support plays a significant role in critically enhancing expatriate sense of belongingness enabling better adaptation to host countries idiosyncrasies (Bader et al., 2019; Bruning et al., 2012; Malek et al., 2013). Moreover, prior research have illustrated healthy co-worker relationship enhances engagement through collective pride, communication, team bonding which stimulates opportunity and thriving (Anitha, 2014). According to COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), stress incurred from unparalleled situations can threaten loss of resources. Withdrawing from host organization or lowering work productivity to conserve resources is a result of negative coping behavior. However, to counteract negative effects HCN support could gravely facilitate feelings of isolation and restore connectedness to host nation enabling lower resource loss which in turn leads to motivational work induced behavior. More specifically, HCNs could play a critical role in diminishing language barrier of basic government announcements, aiding with acquisition of daily essentials and providing an informational insight to the change in job aspects and requirement to fulfil current job roles. In agreement with COR theory, assistance from HCNs could restore lost resources and fuel engagement.

The SEM analysis results imply that EE significantly mediates the relationship between POS and HCN on EP.

No prior studies have examined the link between HCN, EE and performance similarly very few studies have implicitly examined the link between POS, EE and performance. In line with COR theory expatriates will engage in positive motivational behavior to avoid resource loss such as seeking HCN support; engagement facilitates perception of HCN support acquired therefore, influencing performance (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The findings are in line with works of Halbesleben and Bowler (2007) whereby, loss in resources led to lower performance; yet greater investment in organizational citizenship behavior directed at co-workers. Results further support propositions made by Lazarova et al. (2010) on the mediating influence of engagement on performance. Engagement is a critical resource that can be used to regulate behavior and elucidate the positive side of expatriation (Davies et al., 2019). Individuals who are positively engrossed in their work are more likely to conduce positive perception of POS and HCN support thus, enacting heightened performance. Despite this, the existent literature on EP, the issues involving underperformance and disengagement are yet to be explored nuancedly (Andresen et al., 2014; van der Heijden et al., 2009). EE is the missing motivational link which enables the transfer of positive perception support dictating successful performance. Grant Thornton (2020) derived a need for proactive engagement amongst mobility professionals to successfully navigate business during the current turbulence in business faced globally due to COVID-19.

The findings illustrate that the relationship between support mechanism and engagement may not be straightforward as presumed in earlier research. The effectiveness of support mechanisms during a risk induced scenario can be significantly influenced by risk perceptions (Savadori & Lauriola, 2021). The moderating role of PR is consistent with workplace association literature which implies that due to lack of security of job, expatriates tend to be more productive (Malik & Garg, 2017). PR could lead to potential feelings of anxiety and stress. However, as observed from our study a perception of risk in turn increased engagement which could be associated with the fear of layoff. Out of 114 expatriates, 43 (37.7%) have expressed severe PR during COVID-19, they have scored above 3.5 on a five-point Likert scale. As the global economy has approached a standstill, the International Labor Organization predicted 38% of the workforce are at a risk of pay cut or layoff. Under the worst-case scenario Malaysian Institute of Economic Research has predicted an unemployment rate of 9.2% based on the country's 15.87 million labor force. This has potentially induced fear amongst expatriates who are susceptible to losing their current job positions which increases engagement. Thus, the "bright" side of PR can be elucidated to elevate positive work behavior however,

it cannot be sustained without consistent support mechanisms (Hobfoll, 2011).

SP significantly moderates the relationship between HCN support, POS, and EE. The more sensitivity towards the virus results in more fear, anxiety, and depression which is bound to affect their work performance (Usher et al., 2020). The study of nature on COVID-19, is the first of its kind to explore the implications of the moderating role of SP and its impact on EE. Out of 114 expatriates, 46 (40.4%) have expressed severe SP during COVID-19, they have scored above 3.5 on a five-point Likert scale. Sensory processing sensitivity revealed both negative and positive connotations of highly sensitive expatriates who were less willing to obtain new information yet, they were able to avoid errors and were high in conscientiousness (Aron & Aron, 1997; Gerstenberg, 2012). Increased sensitivity is likely to lower resources available to embrace support mechanisms, this lowers resource investment thus, influencing engagement levels.

## 5.1 | Managerial implications

The findings of the study implicate that engagement is an essential mediator and factor for consideration when assigning an employee in the global workforce. Support mechanisms solely may not be perceived as useful unless the expatriate is engaged within their work driving motivation to seek support to complete tasks. Organizations are significantly faced with challenges in altering their long- and short-term goals and are racing against time to fight the pandemic as competition and challenges arise (Carmin et al., 2021). Anitha (2014) determined special focus is required on developing working environment and co-worker relationship to enhance engagement and performance within employees. Following COR theory, MNCs are urged to foster a positive environment that is supportive and communicative whilst diminishing differences between local and expatriate workers. A crossover of engagement can be cultivated to ensure expatriates, local employees, teams, and organization use resources that enhance engagement and resilience (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This is further fueled by clear and transparent communication from managers and HR which is likely to buffer the anxiety faced (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Moreover, the companies are advised to offer support practices such as webinars on resilience, virtual counselling services and tutorial on mindfulness to mitigate stress (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Through sharing a stressful experience, the emotional bonding between colleagues is fostered which could foster a budding relationship between HCNs and expatriates to achieve goals and prosper together. An engaged workforce is bound to drive organization into success.

Despite, unprecedented circumstances to retain expatriate talents in a country facing possible brain drain MNCs need to cautiously sustain talent within the organization and enhance knowledge sharing. High sensitivity and PR needs to be regulated to reduce anxiety and stress through therapy and well-being management. Technology needs to be leveraged to enhance communication flow and cohesiveness amongst employees within an organization. This emphasizes the immediate need of support an organization needs to provide to their expatriate employees to avert negative work outcomes and ensure a moderate flow of business transactions.

## 5.2 | Limitations and future research

Despite, the significant contribution of the current study in enhancing the literature on risk management in the field of expatriation, there are some limitations that need to be addressed by future scholars. The first limitation of the study is in relation to data collected which is limited to expatriates working in Malaysian MNCs. Future research could conduct a comparative study to comprehend the similarity and differences in performance which could be influenced by various factors such as government regulations, organizational policies, and cultural differences. The second limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study since, the data was collected over a specific period of time which was the early implementation of restriction of movement order. A gradual pattern or change in behavior and performance could have been determined by conducting a longitudinal study. The study faced constraints in obtaining a large sample size due to COVID-19 restriction which led to difficulties in data collection and persuasive tactics were limited, taking into consideration the psychological strain of expatriates. Furthermore, the selection of expatriates is difficult in Malaysia due to the lack of information and confidentiality held by major MNCs. Finally, lack of previous research studies on the topic limited acquisition of secondary data could further enhance the literature on PR and sensitivity to the pandemic.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on COR theory, we introduced SP into the field of expatriate management and analyzed its influence on EP. Through engagement expatriates are more likely to perceive and acquire organizational support in turn enhancing their performance. Without these support mechanisms under the prevailing pandemic around the globe, expatriates will lose self-confidence in job engagement and performance due to the exposed risk of catching the virus,

threat to job security and isolation from family and friends. Sensitivity of an expatriate towards the virus gravely influences fear, anxiety, and depression which bound to affect their work performance. It is necessary to prepare expatriates for threats of pandemics to be better managed in various aspects of international assignments during the crisis. With 82.1% of companies implementing work from home for expatriates in affected areas throughout the globe, it is essential to provide the appropriate extent of support and train expatriates to be prepared for any such future threats (Mercer, 2021).

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author acknowledges no conflict of interest exists in the submission of this manuscript.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS


Ankita Sahoo is the main author of the paper, and she conceptualized the theoretical framework, conducted data curation, and wrote the original draft. Nelvin Leow Xechung is the co-author who conducted the formal analysis and investigated the results. Md. Imtiaz Mostafiz administered the project and assisted in reviewing and editing process. Jayaraman Krishnaswamy is the main supervisor who validated the results and assisted in the review and editing process.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. ORCID (if appropriate)

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