



**ACADEMIC SELF-HANDICAPPING BEHAVIOR  
AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT  
AMONG THE STUDENTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL  
ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA**

**BY**

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degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education**

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## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the present study is to develop and validate the model of predictors of academic self-handicapping (POASH) on the data derived from undergraduate students in an ongoing co-curriculum compulsory course. The study adapted and extended the original theory of reciprocal interaction of emotion, cognition and behavior by adding self-handicapping behavior component. Consequently, this study assessed the direct and indirect effects of emotion, cognition and behavior via student engagement on self-handicapping behaviour (SHB). The data was collected from two self-reported questionnaires administered to 790 undergraduates of the International Islamic University in Malaysia. A confirmatory three-step approach theory testing and development using Maximum Likelihood method was applied by using AMOS version 16. Results proved that, the three factor measurement model is empirically fit and reliable. This enhanced the formulation of the partial disaggregation model of “Predictors of Academic Self-Handicapping” (POASH) which consists of one latent variable and three manifest variables. The results of structured equation modeling supported the adequacy of POASH model and the causal structure of POASH model proved to be applicable to both genders and nationality statuses. Among other findings the research produced empirical evidence that scores of student engagement were negatively predicting (20%) of academic self-handicapping behavior; with male student predicting SHB with higher scores (25%) than female students (21%). And with a significant prediction of national students scores (25%) of SHB while international students revealed insignificant prediction score (12%) of SHB, Moreover, the results of gender invariance revealed that behavioral engagement is relatively more influential (70%) than both emotional and cognitive engagement in influencing SHB, while emotional engagement influences SHB more (55%) than the cognitive engagement (31%) does. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that emotional engagement, behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement are significant negative predictors of academic self-handicapping with significantly higher prediction of behavioral engagement, followed by emotional engagement and lastly by cognitive engagement on academic self-handicapping. Thus, improving the depth of students’ academic engagement skills in order to counteract academic self-handicapping behavior and to improve student achievement becomes inevitable. More studies on self-handicapping and student engagement are therefore recommended.

## خلاصة البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تقييم نموذج المتنبعات الإعاقة الذاتية الأكاديمية (POASH) استناداً على البيانات المستمدة من طلبة مرحلة البكالوريوس المسجلين في مادة المناهج المرافقة الإيجابية. وتبنت الدراسة وطورت نظرية التفاعل المتبادل الأصلية للعاطفة والإدراك والسلوك، وذلك من خلال إضافة عامل سلوك الإعاقة الذاتية. وبفعل ذلك، فقد تمكنت الدراسة من تقييم الآثار المباشرة وغير المباشرة للعاطفة والإدراك والسلوك عبر مشاركة الطلبة في أنشطة سلوك الإعاقة الذاتية. وتم جمع بيانات الدراسة باستخدام اثنتين من نوعي استبانة الإبلاغ الذاتي والتي وُزعت على 790 طالباً وطالبة في مرحلة البكالوريوس بالجامعة الإسلامية العالمية بماليزيا. واستخدمت الدراسة الأسلوب التوكيدي ذي المراحل الثلاث لاختبار وتطوير النظرية من خلال منهج الحد الاحتمالي الأقصى باستخدام برنامج التحليل الإحصائي AMOS الإصدار السادس عشرة. وقد أشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى ملائمة وثبات نموذج قياس العوامل الثلاثة تجريبياً. وعززت هذه النتيجة صياغة التقسيم الجزئي لنموذج متنبعات سلوك الإعاقة الذاتية الأكاديمية، والتي تتكون من متغير كامن وثلاثة متغيرات ظاهرة. وقد دعمت نتائج تحليل نموذج المعالجة الخطية البنائية كفاءة نموذج POASH، كذلك أثبتت النتائج على أن نموذج الهيكل السببي لـ POASH يمكن تطبيقه على عوامل الجنسين والجنسية. وتمخضت عن النتائج الأخرى للدراسة وجود دليل تجريبي بأن نتائج مشاركة الطلبة تنبأت سلوك الإعاقة الذاتية الأكاديمية سلباً بنسبة (20%)، وتنبأ عامل الطلاب SHB بنتائج عالية (25%) أكثر من الطالبات (21%). وأظهرت النتائج تنبأً مهماً لنتائج الطلبة المحليين (25%) لـ SHB بينما أبدت النتائج تنبأً غير مهم لنتائج الطلبة الوافدين (12%) لـ SHB. وعلاوة على ذلك، فقد توصلت النتائج إلى أن المشاركة السلوكية أكثر تأثيراً بنسبة (70%) لكل من العاطفة والمشاركة الإدراكية في التأثير على SHB، بينما تؤثر المشاركة العاطفية في SHB بأكثر من (55%) من المشاركة الإدراكية (31%). ومن ثمّ فقد كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة على أن المشاركة العاطفية والمشاركة السلوكية والمشاركة الإدراكية متنبعات سلبية ذات دلالة إحصائية للإعاقة الذاتية الأكاديمية بدرجة تنبؤ عالٍ للمشاركة السلوكية، وتتبع المشاركة العاطفية ذلك في درجة التنبؤ ذات الدلالة الإحصائية، ثم المشاركة الإدراكية في التأثير على الإعاقة الذاتية الأكاديمية. وخلصت نتائج الدراسة إلى ضرورة التحسين العميق لمهارات مشاركة الطلبة من أجل مواجهة سلوك الإعاقة الذاتية الأكاديمية وتحسين تحصيل الطلبة. وختاماً، أوصت الدراسة بإجراء العديد من الدراسات في المستقبل على المشاركة الطلابية والإعاقة الذاتية الأكاديمية.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Hafsa Mzee Mwita

Signature .....

Date .....

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*This study is dedicated to:*

*My late father through the Mercy and Blessings of Allah who began the foundation of  
the milestone of my educational history from the stage of infancy*

*My Mother who endured the decades of separation between us from infancy to date*

*My dear sister who has been my little Mum from infancy to date*

*My nieces and nephews for their unconditional regards*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

University Counseling Units provide various mental health and other services within the university environment. The need for more counseling services within the universities can be identified from students' level of stress, depression, worries, anxiety, sadness, low self-esteem, low academic achievement and immorality, which all indicate the existence of self-handicapping behavior and disengagement among students. Arnett (2007) has this to say about the emerging adults:

One claim made frequently about emerging adults is that they are miserable lot, wracked with anxiety & unhappiness, intimidated to the point of paralysis about the grim prospects for entering the adult world. According to this view, the years from age 18 to 25 are dark and dreary period of life course. Emerging adults are typically confused and glum and overwhelmed by what the world seems to require from them.

Newman (1992), argued that students attend class but with little excitement, commitment and pride in mastering the curriculum; they have no psychological investment in learning – such are the characteristics of self-handicapping behaviors. The cooperative institutional Research Program (CIRP) of the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (2002) commented that many college students were awarded superior grades in high school without learning how to study. They reported that, more than 60% of new undergraduates spent less than 6 hours per week studying, even though 90% earned a high school grade point average of B or higher. And they concluded that, inadequate study habits create enormous stress, whereby the signs of stress predict the practicing of academic self-handicapping as also proved in the study of Sahranc, (2011) who reported a significant relationship between self-handicapping,

depression, anxiety and stress after a correlation and SEM analysis. Therefore, early detection and intervention of self-handicapping behavior becomes inevitable.

College counseling centers within USA, reported increased frequency and severity of students' mental health concerns (Harper & Peterson, 2005), while mental health is very well known to be linked with retention and academic performance (Backels & Wheeler, 2001). Harper and Peterson (2005) quoted the suggestion from the Office of student life studies (2000) which suggested an importance of academic advisors in knowing the signals of distress – which are listed below and which are also among the self-handicapping behaviors, as well as signs of disengagement.

- Excessive procrastination.
- Decrease in the quality of work.
- Too frequent office visits (dependency).
- Listlessness (Lethargy).
- Sleeping in class.
- Marked changes in personal hygiene.
- Impaired speech or disjointed thoughts.
- Threats regarding self or others.
- Marked changes in behavior.

In addition Harper and Peterson (2005) added the following list of distress which was compiled by the advisors at the National Academic Advising Association of USA, Canada and other International Countries (NACADA, 2005) region's 6<sup>th</sup> conference and which are also among the indicators of self-handicapping behaviors.

- Flat affect (failure to show emotions).
- Under-responding to academic notice.
- Absence from class.
- Too much or too little time spent in the residential hall.
- Crying.
- Incongruent effect (smiling while crying).
- Lack of follow-through.
- Unable to describe own emotion.

Most of the researchers define self-handicapping as student's behavior which involves creating obstacles to successful performance on tasks that the student considers important (Rhodewalt, 1994; and Tice, 1991), and when the student fail he/she looks for excuses for e.g. blame the teacher, blame the parents, and blame the friends. They would express themselves as being lazy or shiftless (Covington, 1992) instead of accepting the fact that they have a lower ability in that particular subject and that they need to exert more effort in order to achieve good grades. This implies that self-handicapping behavior is opposite to student engagement.

In some cases when students fear that they will fail, they would engage in activities that would increase their probability of failure (Urdang, 2004), for example procrastinate by engaging themselves with many side activities to the extent of having very little time for their revision and fulfilling their assignments. Self-handicapping students tend to have low self-esteem, increase in negative behavior, lack of academic motivation, lack of student engagement and consequently low achievement. This is also confirmed by Bandura (1986) who claim that learning problems and behavioral problems coexist therefore teachers need to be aware that students with one of these problems are more susceptible to the other problem.

Academic self-concept is critical in the academic growth of the student because it has a direct effect on college performance, parents' expectations, community expectations, student's future career, as well as his/her lifestyle and successes. However, one's behavior is in accordance to ones belief about oneself (Woods 1998). This assumption is being supported by Lotkowski, Robbins, Noeth, (2004), who argued that Individuals' beliefs about the self are organized and involve beliefs about general or global competence as well as beliefs about specific abilities that are valued by the culture (Lotkowski, et al., 2004). Thus, REBT emphasizes the

importance of attending to irrational beliefs that that help to create disturbances in individuals' lives (Sharf,` 2004 p322).

Most of the previous studies on students and teachers have been focusing on students' achievement while students are obliged to engage with the university requirements, lectures' requirements, campus activities, rules and regulations so as to have a successful achievement. The most pressing and persistent issue for students and teachers, according to Newman (1992), is not low achievement, but student engagement. According to Finlay (2006), the engaged student is expected to show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. Multicultural Counselling has shown factors like culture, gender, identity and religion as important aspects of wellbeing (Fuertes and Gretchen, 2001; Sue and Sue, 2003; Pederson, 2007).

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Previous studies have identified self-handicapping behavior as one of the major academic concerns in both higher and lower institutions (Rhodewalt& Davidson, 1986; Berglas & Jones 1978; Higgins & Hariss, 1988; Shepperd & Arkin, 1989; Tice & Baumeister, 1990). Today it is still considered an important concern as commented in Palasigue (2009). "In today's post-modern society, it is getting harder and harder to get the students get engaged in classroom instruction and learning" Many of them want to know how to pass the course and get a better career of their choice if they fail to cope with the course, they may choose to apply various psychological, behavioural and/or physical obstructs (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). This academic self-handicapping is a severe problem with emerging adults (Jeffrey, 2007 & Newman

1992) regardless of their nationalities and cultures including the emerging adults from the Muslim world.

Although self-handicapping is evident among tertiary level students, most of the previous studies on self-handicap have been conducted on the primary and secondary school students. For example studies on the influence of the level of academic achievement: - (e.g., MacIver and Epstein, (1993); Blyth Simmons & Carlton-Ford (1993); Eccles, Wigfield, Flanagan, Miller, Reuman & Yee (1989); Epstein & McPartland (1976). Studies on the decrease of self-esteem e.g. Simons & Blyth, (1987); Wigfield, Eccles, Mac Iven, Ruemsn & Midgeley (1991); the increase of psychological distress: - (e.g., Chung Elias, and Schneider (1998); Hirsch & Rapkin, (1987); academic motivation (e.g., Harter, (1981); and (e.g., self-concept: Marsh (1989).

Among the few studies which have been conducted on students of higher institutions, are the studies of: Jones and Berglas (1978); Rhodewalt, Morf, Hazlett & Fairfield, (1991); Seligman, Nolen-Hoeksema, Susan, Thomton, Thomson and Karen, (1990); Zuckerman & Tsai, 2005; McCrea, Hirt and Milner, (2008); Pulford, Johnson & Awaida, (2005); Kearns, Forbes and Gardner (2008); Wu, Kee, Lin & Shu (2009); Sahranç (2011); Martin, Marsh and Debus,(1999). However, the researcher could not trace any self-handicapping study which was carried out at the higher Islamic Institution

According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 1999), the mission of university and college counselling centres is: *“to assist students in defining and accomplishing personal, academic and career goals, by providing developmental preventive and remedial counselling”*. Hence it is pivotal to investigate significant predictors of academic self-handicapping which will

help counsellors and educators, in identifying and rectifying academic self-handicapping and consequently improve students' academic engagement and achievement.

Many changes experienced among youths have been found to have a negative influence on their efficacy which includes practicing self-handicapping behavior, reduction in the level of student engagement, decreased self-esteem and increase in psychological distress as noted by Sahranc (2011) who proved a significant relationship between self-handicapping, depression, anxiety and stress similarly Hobden and Pliner (1995) who reported a positive relationship between self-handicapping and negative emotional mood state.

Student engagement is critical in the academic growth of the student because it affects the student's future career as well as his/her lifestyle and successes. Islamic concepts are inculcated in a Muslim's mind from child hood until the last day of his/her existence in this world, yet Muslim youths practice self-handicapping behavior in their day to day life. "Self-handicappers choose obstacles to successful performance that would enable them to find excuses for failure away from their competence and onto the acquired obstacle, in so doing they try to avoid disconfirmation of a desired self-concept" (Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986).

According to the attribution theory (Weiner, 1974; 1986), individuals have a basic desire to balance their perception of present self with a relevant representative standard or future self-image (Scheier & Carver, 1998; 1982; 1983; 1985). Hence, incongruence between how the young adult pursue self and the aspirations pursued may lead the student to maladaptive externalizing behaviours including self-handicapping behavior. By studying what, why and how student self-handicap, counsellors, psychologists and

educators can help the handicappers to rectify their negative behavior and solve their existing behavioural problems, in a less destructive way.

When all the academic institutions and community at large would be able to recognize academic self-handicapping as a major issue faced by many students, then the rate of negative behavior would reduce and higher percentage of students would be fully engaged with their studies. Hence, the final outcome would be the increasing rate of higher achiever in the institutions and nations, which would also boost the national economy and development and also reduce the percentage of low pay workers and jobless people.

This study examines the academic SHB among the undergraduate students with the main purpose of developing and validating the model of Predictors of Academic SHB (POASH) on the data derived from 790 undergraduate students. The data was collected from the two instruments i.e. SHB Questionnaire (SHQ, 2011) and Student Engagement Questionnaire SEQ (2011) which is composed of emotional engagement, cognitive engagement and behavioural engagement and which also forms the predictors of the POASH model.

Although academic self-handicapping has been studied by many researchers, none of the previous studies used the reciprocal interaction of emotion, cognition and behavior as predictors of academic self-handicapping. Therefore, this study applied REBT which is the parent of cognitive behavioral therapy assuming that cognitions, emotions and behaviors interacting significantly and have a reciprocal cause-and-effect relationship (Corey, 2013, p.267). REBT has been used in this study to formulate the measurement of USE and extend the theory by attaching the SHB construct in-order to form the POASH model.

## **1.3 CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION OF THE STUDY**

### **1.3.1 Introduction**

Many changes experienced among youths have been found to have a negative influence on their efficacy which includes practicing self-handicapping behavior, reduction in the level of student engagement, decreased self-esteem and increase in psychological distress. Student engagement is critical in the academic growth of the student because it affects the student's future career as well as his/her lifestyle and successes. For Muslims, it is not only the loss of worldly successes, but also the loss of successes of an afterlife which is of greater importance to them than the present life. Islamic concepts are inculcated in a Muslim's mind from child hood until the last day of his/her existence in this world, yet Muslim youths, like any other youths, are seen to be practicing self-handicapping behavior in their day to day life. Self-handicappers have been described by Rhodewalt and Davison, (1986) as those who create obstacles to successful performance that would enable them to find excuses for failure away from their competence and onto the acquired obstacle, he also reported that in creating self-obstacles one tries to avoid disconfirmation of a desired self-concept.

Although the International Islamic University Malaysia runs various counselling programs and activities as well as provides individual and group counselling services on educational and career counselling, yet, there is a need of emphasizing more on self handicapping behavior of IIUM students with the fact that not a single study on self handicapping behavior of IIUM students has yet been conducted, although the issue is very common among the undergraduate students as identified during the pilot study. Therefore, the researcher decided to base this study on the emerging adults of International Islamic University Malaysia and also to apply