

Is Sensation-Seeking Always Bad? The Role of Sensation-Seeking in Predicting Individual Work Role Performance

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Abstract. Sensation-seeking can be an outcome predictor in an organization when expressed through several social cognitive variables, such as emotional intelligence. Thus, the behavior generated by sensation-seeking can be more functional. The purpose of this study is to identify whether sensation-seeking can be expressed through emotional intelligence to predict individual performance. This study uses a quantitative design with a correlational strategy. The study participants were 167 Indonesian employees from three banking, oil and gas, and mining industries who filled out a questionnaire investigating their sensation-seeking, emotional intelligence, and individual performance. The questionnaires used Work Role Performance Scale and Learning Style Profiler. Data analysis was done by mediation process from Hayes. The results show that sensation-seeking and emotional intelligence directly predicts individual performance. However, indirect effect analysis proves that emotional intelligence cannot express sensation-seeking to predict individual performance. Thus, people who have high level of sensation-seeking not always bad because they can be an active learner also improve their work role performance in organization.

Keywords: individual work role performance, rationality, sensation-seeking

Apakah Mencari Sensasi Selalu Buruk? Peran Pencarian Sensasi dalam Memprediksi Performansi Peran Kerja Individu

Abstrak. Pencarian sensasi (*sensation-seeking*) dapat menjadi prediktor hasil dalam organisasi ketika diekspresikan melalui beberapa variabel kognitif sosial, seperti kecerdasan emosional (*emotional intelligence*). Dengan demikian, perilaku yang ditimbulkan oleh pencarian sensasi bisa menjadi lebih fungsional. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah mengidentifikasi apakah pencarian sensasi dapat ditunjukkan melalui kecerdasan emosional untuk memprediksi kinerja individu. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain kuantitatif dengan strategi korelasional. Partisipan penelitian adalah 167 karyawan di Indonesia yang mengisi kuesioner untuk melihat pencarian sensasi, kecerdasan emosional, dan performansi individual. Kuesioner yang digunakan adalah Skala *Work Role Performance* dan *Learning Style Profiler*. Analisis data yang digunakan adalah proses mediasi dari Hayes. Hasil penelitian terhadap 167 karyawan dari tiga organisasi perbankan, minyak dan gas bumi, dan pertambangan menunjukkan bahwa pencarian sensasi dan kecerdasan emosional memprediksi performansi individu secara langsung. Namun, analisis efek tidak langsung membuktikan bahwa kecerdasan emosional tidak dapat menunjukkan pencarian sensasi untuk memprediksi kinerja individu. Dengan demikian, orang dengan pencarian sensasi yang tinggi tidak selalu buruk karena mereka dapat menjadi pembelajar aktif juga memperbaiki performansi kinerja di organisasi.

Kata Kunci: pencarian sensasi, performansi peran kerja individu, rasionalitas

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Individual performance is an interesting and important topic in organizational psychology (Koopmans et al, 2011; Sott et al, 2020). High-performing employees help an organization improve its productivity and competitiveness. Further, employees who perform well are less likely to be dismissed (Koopmans et al, 2011). In this turbulent era, organizations are more likely to seek high-performing employees in order to compete and survive. However, aspects such as individual differences or situational factors may also influence how an individual performs in their work (Barrick et al, 2013). In this study, we are interested to investigate whether individual differences in personality predict employee performance. This is important since every individual is different and unique. This uniqueness will influence how each individual perceive their work and behaves in the workplace (Ajzen, 2001).

Performance at work is normally measured by employee productivity rather than the effectiveness of their work (Griffin et al., 2007). However, to work effectively, individuals should not only use their skills, but should also be adaptable and proactive in conducting their work. Further, they also need to work well as an individual, in groups, and/or at the organizational level. At each level, they need to perform effectively and efficiently. Measuring employee role function is more important and complex since it can predict how employees behave at the individual, group, or

organizational level (Griffin et al, 2007; Neal et al., 2012). This study measures work role performance at the individual level in term of proficiency, adaptivity, and proactivity. It is expected that an employee should have good skills, be able to adapt to situations as they arise, and actively find solutions to work effectively and efficiently in their role in an organization.

One antecedent of job performance that has attracted our interest is personality traits (Alsuwailem & Elnaga, 2016; Neal et al, 2012; Woods et al., 2013). In this study, we are interested on sensation-seeking, instead of Big Five based personality traits (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism), in predicting individual work role performance. Sensation-seeking is the biological impulse to explore and study the environment and may be the basis for both functional and dysfunctional behaviors (Jackson, 2005; Zuckerman, 1994; Zuckerman & Aluja, 2015). People with high levels of sensation-seeking, or sensation-seekers, tend to use this impulse to develop themselves and learn from their environment to enable them to perform well. Previous studies have usually linked sensation-seeking with dysfunctional behaviors, such as drug abuse or poor workplace behavior (Charnigo et al, 2013; Reio & Sanders-Reio, 2006). However, based on the hybrid model of personality and learning described in the Learning Style Profile (LSP) proposed by Jackson (2005), sensation-seeking can become a positive urge that drives people

to learn new things. In the workplace, sensation-seeking can affect an individual's performance because its aspects of curiosity and exploration helps sensation-seekers become active learners. When they are actively learning, they are less likely to be afraid of failing and more likely to be responsible learners.

The LSP suggests that to be functional, sensation-seeking must be expressed through other personality traits, such as rationality, mastery, deep learning achievement, and conscientiousness (Jackson, 2005; Jackson et al., 2009). These traits act as social controls so that sensation-seekers can more effectively channel the urge to explore their environment. By expressing sensation-seeking through other traits, sensation-seekers become more focused and their behavioral outcomes are functional. Since employees are expected to be able to work rationally, we then assume that rationality will be a better channel for sensation-seeking because it can direct sensation-seekers to maintain self-control and behave appropriately.

Rationality, or emotional intelligence achievement in the LSP, measures how an individual understands problems and learns to direct their emotions in a positive way (Jackson, 2005). There are several reasons why emotional intelligence is thought to modify sensation-seeking to generate positive individual performance. First, emotional intelligence is the ability to regulate emotions; therefore, emotionally intelligent individuals

are not easily stressed (Gong et al., 2019; Guy & Lee, 2013). They can also adapt to organizational changes, which leads to improved performance (O'Boyle et al., 2011). Second, emotional intelligence is able to direct the curiosity and exploration of sensation-seekers in more objective and controlled ways (Jackson, 2005). Thus, emotional intelligence is important because it helps individuals to work effectively by controlling their behaviors and emotions and achieving a better performance.

Very few studies have examined sensation-seeking in the context of work as mentioned previously (e.g. Jackson, 2005, Zuckerman, 2015). Our study will investigate whether sensation-seeking can be expressed through rationality to predict individual performance in an organizational setting. The result of our study then may provide evidence that sensation-seeking is not always create bad performance. In fact, it may promote effectivity and productivity to some extent. Therefore, we hypothesize that sensation-seeking can predict individual work role performance through rationality as a mediator.

Method

In this study, data were collected by using both paper-based and online questionnaires. Questionnaires were returned by 170 employees from three organizations engaged in the banking, oil and gas, and mining industries, a 67% response rate. After data

cleaning, only 167 responses were used for the analysis due to incomplete responses. The study involved 103 male employees ($M_{age} = 30.78, SD = 7.02$), who each held a minimum of an undergraduate degree.

Individual work role performance was measured using the Work Role Performance scale by Griffin et al. (Griffin et al., 2007). This consists of nine items to measure individual task proficiency, individual task adaptivity, and individual task proactivity, scored on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Item examples include “coped with changes to the way you have to do your core tasks”; “made changes to the way your core tasks are done”; and “ensured your tasks were completed properly”. The reliability from the original study was all above .70 (Griffin et al., 2007).

To measure sensation-seeking, we used the Sensation-Seeking scale of the LSP (Jackson, 2005). It consists of 15 items and participants respond by choosing “True”, “False”, or “Unable to Decide”. Examples of items are “I’m looking for a new sensation”, “I’m happy to start a new project”; and “I’m looking for a thrilling and exciting activity”. The Rationality Scale from the LSP (Jackson, 2005) was used with 15 items. As for the Sensation-Seeking scale, participants also respond by choosing “True”, “False”, or “Unable to Decide”. Item examples are “I often feel loss of control over my current direction

of life” and “I find it difficult to follow rules when the rules change frequently”. The reliability from the original study was above .69 (Jackson, 2005).

All measurements were translated to Bahasa Indonesia using a translation procedure from Sousa and Rojjanasrirat (2011). There are four steps of translation procedures. First, two people translated from English to Bahasa Indonesia. Second, we made a synthesis from the translations. Third, two different people with good English qualification, translated back the items into English. Finally, we made and clarify the back-translation results to make a synthesis. All scores were summed to obtain a total score. We used a mediation PROCESS macro from Hayes (2018) in SPSS to test our hypothesis.

Result

As shown in Table 1, all measurements had good Cronbach’s alpha values, ranging between .70 and .90. The Pearson correlation results indicated that individual work role performance was positively correlated with both sensation-seeking and rationality ($r = .38$ and $r = .19$, respectively). On the other hand, sensation-seeking did not correlate with rationality. Since Hayes PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) does not require all items to be correlated for mediation analysis, we then analyzed our data further.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations*

	Variable Names	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1	Individual Work Role Performance	4.23	5.15	.90	-	-
2	Sensation seeking	1.68	3.89	.38**	.72	-
3	Rationality	1.44	5.06	.19*	-.07	.70

Note. Cronbach's Alphas are in bold.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

The results suggested that after controlling for rationality, sensation-seeking predicted individual work role performance ($\hat{\alpha} = .53$, $SE = .09$, $t = 5.67$, $p = .000$, 95% CI [.34, .71]). Rationality itself also predicted individual work role performance ($\hat{\alpha} = .22$, $SE = .07$, $t = 3.01$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.07, .36]). Both sensation-seeking and rationality explained 19% of variance in predicting individual work role performance ($R^2 = .19$, $F(2,164) = 19.52$, $p = .000$). The mediation result, however, showed non-significant values ($\hat{\alpha} = -.02$, $SE = .022$, 95% CI [-.076, .016]). Therefore, rationality did not mediate the relationship between sensation-seeking and individual work role performance.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to answer the question as to whether sensation-seeking can be expressed through rationality in predicting individual work role performance. Our hypothesis was not supported by the data. This means that sensation-seeking was not expressed through rationality. Our results did not indicate that rationality can help sensation-seeking be more functional. In fact, sensation-seeking positively and significantly predicted

individual work role performance. We argue that our study participants were more likely to have high levels of sensation-seeking, and thus were more likely to have tried their best to find new ways of completing their work and adapting in their workplaces. As a result, they tended to be a good learners and effective performers (Mussel, 2013). Our results also similar to previous study that individuals with high levels of sensation-seeking may continue developing themselves in order to complete their work, leading to a good individual performance (Jackson, 2005). In addition, we found that sensation-seeking was significantly correlated with performance and can be used to predict and explain employment behavior (Jackson, 2005).

The correlation and regression analysis controlling for the sensation-seeking results showed that rationality predicted individual work role performance. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that emotional intelligence influences performance (Jackson, 2005; O'Boyle et al., 2011). Emotionally intelligent individuals are able to be objective in understanding problems, are independent of others, and do not avoid

problems (Jackson, 2005). Thus, emotional intelligence contributes to work performance by ensuring that the individual acts logically and manages their emotions in the work situation (Gong et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2013). Rationality can help individuals manage their emotions, deal with stress, work better in a stressful atmosphere, and adapt to organizational change. The results of this study also showed that rationality may inhibit sensation-seeking and predict functional behavior. This may be because in order to use sensation-seeking to generate functional behaviors, it must be expressed not only through rationality, but also through mastery (Jackson, 2011; Jackson et al., 2012). Therefore, both cognitive and social mechanisms should also be evaluated.

Some limitations of this study include: first, its cross-sectional design, which means that it cannot determine any causal relationship since the data collection was only done at a single timepoint (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016; Spector, 2019). Additionally, the data for the predictor, criterion, and mediator variables in this study are obtained from the same source. Thus, it may suffer from the common rater effect. Finally, the measuring tools used may be influenced by social desirability because the respondents' answers to the statement in the measuring tools tend to maintain a good image. Social desirability refers to the tendency of individuals to respond to items based on the expected

circumstances or social behavior rather than actual circumstances (Podsakoff et al., 2003, 2012). Common rater effects and social desirability are sources of common method bias and affect the result of analyses of variable.

Conclusions

We conclude that this study shows that sensation-seeking can be functional in the workplace setting. Having high levels of sensation-seeking will not always result in dysfunctional behaviors, since it can drive people to learn new ways of working and to be an active learner. This is important not only for the individual, but also for the organization since it can improve the individual's work role performance.

Suggestion

Based on the results and considering the limitation of the study, several methodological and practical suggestions can be made for future research. Future studies could reduce common method bias by taking data from different sources and maintaining the anonymity of respondents. Second, a path analysis could be employed when using emotional intelligence as the variable expressing sensation-seeking in generating functional behavior. Third, future research should also consider demographic variables to serve as control or moderator variables. Fourth, the use of a cross-sectional design should be evaluated further to maximize the results as suggested by Spector (2019).

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