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Negative Leadership, Workplace Environment, and Job Satisfaction: A Conceptual Model of Employee Performance in Malaysia's Fast-Food Industry

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines how negative leadership behaviours, adverse workplace conditions, and diminished job satisfaction influence employee performance in Malaysia's fast-food sector, with specific focus on Kedah. Despite employing thousands of operational workers, the industry continues to face high turnover rates and toxic workplace dynamics. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET), the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, and Organizational Support Theory (OST), this paper proposes an integrated framework that explains the interrelations between poor leadership, employee well-being, and performance outcomes. The model posits that negative work environments reduce job satisfaction and performance, while supportive leadership and organizational support can mitigate these effects and enhance employee retention. This study contributes to the limited theoretical discourse on HRM in Malaysia's hospitality sector and provides a foundation for future empirical validation and strategic HR interventions aimed at improving workforce stability and service quality.

1. Introduction

The fast-food industry is one of the most dynamic and fast-growing sectors globally, with Malaysia playing a significant role in Southeast Asia's food and beverage landscape. In Kedah alone, over 53,000 individuals are employed in this sector [16]. Despite its importance, the industry faces high employee turnover and low job satisfaction, often attributed to high workloads, lack of support, and toxic management practices [26].

Negative leadership, marked by abusive supervision, micromanagement, and bullying has been shown to impair productivity and increase turnover [34,35]. In high-pressure environments like fast food restaurants, such behaviours can have compounded effects. This paper seeks to explore conceptually how negative leadership behaviours and negative workplace environments affect job

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satisfaction and, consequently, employee performance. The goal is to develop a conceptual framework grounded in relevant theories and propose directions for future empirical testing. Perhaps this ideas will eliminated the leading from the shadows.

2. Problem Statement

High turnover rates in Malaysia's fast-food industry suggest deep-rooted structural and interpersonal issues. Toxic leadership styles erode morale and engagement, leading to poor customer service and increased operational costs [10,31]. Negative environments characterized by poor communication, inadequate resources, and high demands compound emotional exhaustion [4]. Okumus [26] claims that employees often feel more stressed, less motivated, and more unhappy in environments where leaders behave in harsh, unsupportive, or too critical ways. This toxic dynamic not only undermines trust and open communication-critical elements of effective workplace relationships, but also leads to higher turnover rates, as employees actively seek healthier work environments. The resulting instability within teams can further decrease productivity and erode overall organizational morale, making it essential to address the root causes and effects of negative leadership behaviors on employees to sustain a stable and productive workforce. It is crucial to prioritize employee job satisfaction in the hospitality industry, as success is contingent upon the attention and accommodations provided to employees who deliver exceptional customer service [9].

The physical setting in the hospitality industry plays a crucial role in influencing employee job satisfaction Whether in a hotel, restaurant, or event venue, the environment significantly impacts employee experiences [24]. This is important to know that job demands contribute significantly to employee stress, adversely impacting both satisfaction and performance [3,26]. Therefore, addressing the impact of high job demands on employee satisfaction and performance is critical to creating a sustainable, motivated and productive workforce. Yet, limited conceptual work exists on operational employees in Malaysia's fast-food sector, especially in Kedah. This paper fills that gap by proposing a contextualized conceptual framework [1,27,36].

The fast-food industry in Malaysia is currently grappling with several workforce challenges, the most pressing of which is its high employee turnover rate. Recent industry data suggests that turnover in Malaysia's quick service restaurants (QSRs) can reach as high as 67% annually, with nearly 45% of employees resigning within their first year of employment [28]. These trends are often attributed to underlying issues such as toxic leadership, poor communication, and emotional exhaustion. Toxic leadership alone has been shown to cause significant damage to employee morale and engagement. For instance, 76% of employees who report to negative or overly critical leaders experience diminished morale [26], while such environments are linked to a 32% reduction in employee engagement [31]. Employees working under toxic conditions are also 2.5 times more likely to leave their jobs compared to those in supportive environments [10].

Beyond leadership, emotional exhaustion and high job demands remain core challenges. A study by Ariza-Montes *et al.*, [3] reported that 62% of frontline service workers in hospitality roles feel "emotionally drained" at least weekly. High job demands have been statistically linked to declines in job satisfaction (-29%), work performance (-18%), and increases in absenteeism (+21%). In contrast, positive physical environments and supportive leadership can serve as important buffers. Well-designed workplace environments can improve job satisfaction by up to 34% [24] while supportive management can boost customer service quality by 27% [9]. Furthermore, when trust and open communication are present, turnover rates can be reduced by 40%, highlighting the vital role that a healthy organizational climate plays in retaining employees and sustaining operational performance.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Employee Performance

Employee performance refers to the efficiency and quality with which an employee fulfills their job responsibilities, which is influenced by both individual factors and organizational conditions [13]. In the fast-paced hospitality sector such as the fast-food industry, performance is highly dependent on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and leadership quality [20]. Studies show that negative leadership directly diminishes employee engagement, which consequently impairs performance outcomes [31]. Furthermore, a poor workplace environment, marked by high job demands and low support, often leads to emotional exhaustion and disengagement, key predictors of low performance [3,30]. Conversely, organizational support and psychological safety have been found to mediate and enhance employee productivity by promoting trust and empowerment [7,21]. In recent studies, particularly in service sectors including fast-food outlets, frontline employees who report higher perceived organizational support and job satisfaction consistently deliver better service, achieve operational efficiency, and show reduced turnover [5,9]. These findings align with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, which emphasizes the need for sufficient resources (e.g., support, autonomy, recognition) to buffer job stress and maintain performance [15].

Additionally, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) underlines that when employees perceive fairness and reciprocity in their interactions with management, they reciprocate with increased loyalty and performance [14,17]. Therefore, employee performance is a multidimensional construct affected by psychological, organizational, and interpersonal dynamics. Sustained high performance in the fast-food industry requires supportive leadership, a healthy work environment, and strategies that enhance employee satisfaction and well-being.

3.2 Negative Leadership Behaviours

Negative leadership includes abusive supervision, bullying, and psychological abuse. These behaviours create toxic environments, reduce trust, and heighten emotional exhaustion [35]. Such leadership increases turnover and reduces workplace morale [34]. Leaders who engage in such behaviors foster a culture of fear and mistrust, which negatively impacts employee well-being and reduces organizational effectiveness [26]. Research by Miser and Pantumsinchai [23] highlights the destructive impact of such leadership styles on employee morale, further compounding high turnover and customer service issues.

Table 1

Past study of negative leadership behaviour

AUTHORS	FINDINGS
Michael Tews and Kathryn Stafford [34]	This research examined abusive supervision and its impact on turnover among entry-level employees in the hospitality industry. The study found that abusive leadership behaviors significantly increase turnover intentions, as employees feel undervalued and unsupported in toxic work environments.
Yu <i>et al.</i> , [35]	This systematic review analyzed 36 articles on abusive supervision in the hospitality and tourism sectors. The findings emphasized that abusive leadership practices negatively affect employee engagement, performance, and job satisfaction, creating a toxic organizational culture that harms both individuals and the business.

3.3 Negative Workplace Environment

A hostile or unsupportive workplace-lacking in communication, autonomy, and fairness-can impair performance. In the fast-food context, high job demands with minimal support lead to burnout and disengagement [26,30]. The absence of a supportive work culture exacerbates stress levels, negatively affecting job satisfaction and overall productivity [4]. Employees are more likely to experience emotional exhaustion, which leads to higher absenteeism and lower performance. In fast-paced industries, negative workplace dynamics not only affect individual employees but also hinder team cohesion and organizational performance. High turnover rates, absenteeism, and operational inefficiencies are frequently observed in such environments, further compounding the challenges faced by businesses [2]. Addressing negative workplace environments is therefore crucial for creating conditions that support employee satisfaction and organizational success [35].

Table 2

Past study of negative workplace environment

AUTHORS	FINDINGS
Okumus <i>et al.</i> , [26]	This study examined the relationship between job stress and negative workplace environments in the hospitality sector. The findings revealed that high job demands and insufficient management support led to lower job satisfaction and increased turnover.
Chen and Wang [10]	This study explored the effects of perceived support on employee performance in hospitality and fast food environments. Employees who reported feeling undervalued and unsupported experienced higher absenteeism and lower commitment to their roles.
Bloisi and Hoel [6]	This research examined the normalization of toxic behaviors, such as harassment and aggressive supervision, in high- pressure environments like commercial kitchens. It found that these practices, often justified as necessary for efficiency, had severe consequences for employee well-being and team cohesion.

3.4 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is linked with motivation and performance. Dissatisfaction often stems from poor management, low pay, and lack of growth [31]. Satisfied employees are more likely to be committed and productive [10]. Factors such as leadership style, work environment, and organizational support play critical roles in shaping job satisfaction and ultimately impacting employee retention in the fast-food sector [4]. The other major component within an organization is the relationship among employees. The strong bonds existing among members of a team can ease some of the job's stressors as well, as everyone provides support and feels part of the group. In contrast, workplaces characterized by harassment, rudeness or interpersonal problems are likely to lead to feelings of dissatisfaction as such issues undermine trust and good order in the workplace [23].

Table 3

Past study of job satisfaction in fast food restaurant

AUTHORS	FINDINGS
Taheri <i>et al.</i> , [31]	This research analyzed abusive supervision in commercial kitchens, revealing that employees under abusive supervisors experienced significant declines in job satisfaction. It emphasized the importance of managerial training to mitigate toxic leadership behaviors and improve workplace morale.
Kim <i>et al.</i> , [37]	This study examined the role of bullying and emotional exhaustion in hotel restaurant kitchens, finding that high levels of harassment and lack of emotional support from management were key factors reducing job satisfaction. Employees who faced bullying reported higher turnover intentions and reduced engagement.
Ariza-Montes <i>et al.</i> , [4]	This research highlighted the impact of teamwork and interpersonal relationships on job satisfaction. Positive team dynamics and collaborative environments were found to significantly enhance employee satisfaction, while hostile interactions and poor communication reduced morale and increased stress.

3.5 Fast Food Industry in Malaysia

The fast-food industry in Malaysia has seen significant growth over the past two decades, driven by urbanization, changing lifestyles, and increased consumer demand for convenience [18]. Malaysia's fast food sector is part of the broader quick service restaurant (QSR) industry, characterized by high customer volume, fast turnover, and standardized menu offerings. This sector is particularly significant in urban centers, where dual-income households and time constraints have influenced eating habits [12].

One of the notable challenges faced by the industry is high employee turnover, especially among frontline operational staff such as cashiers, kitchen crew, and service attendants. Research indicates that the fast-food sector in Malaysia experiences turnover rates exceeding 60%, significantly higher than in other service sectors [22]. The industry is also marked by intense pressure, long working hours, limited job security, and relatively low wages, contributing to widespread dissatisfaction and burnout among employees [29].

According to Talib and Ibrahim [32], the Malaysian fast food industry has been forced to adapt to increased competition and labor shortages by investing in automation and digital ordering systems. However, such technological interventions may exacerbate employee disengagement if not paired with effective leadership and human resource support.

From a cultural standpoint, fast food in Malaysia must also cater to religious and dietary preferences, especially for the Muslim-majority population. As a result, halal certification plays a central role in operations and marketing strategies [19]. This adds another layer of complexity to employee training, operational compliance, and quality assurance.

Despite these challenges, the industry continues to expand, with international brands opening more outlets and local fast food chains gaining traction. However, to ensure sustainable growth, stakeholders must address human resource issues, particularly employee satisfaction, leadership quality, and workplace environment [33].

4. Theoretical Underpinnings

4.1 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

SET posits that fair treatment by the organization fosters loyalty and commitment. Negative leadership disrupts this balance, leading to disengagement [17]. In fast food environments, where employees often work under high-pressure conditions, the principles of SET are particularly relevant.

Workers expect a balanced exchange where their contributions are acknowledged and reciprocated with tangible and intangible benefits, such as career growth opportunities, respectful treatment, and emotional support. When these expectations are unmet, employees may withhold effort, disengage, or even leave their positions [35]. Research further highlights that the breakdown of this reciprocal relationship can lead to increased absenteeism, lower productivity, and heightened turnover intentions, particularly in industries with high employee mobility, such as fast food [26]. The application of SET in this research highlights the importance of fostering supportive leadership and cultivating positive relationships within the organization. By focusing on creating equitable exchanges, managers can mitigate the negative effects of high job demands and stressful environments, promoting job satisfaction and long-term employee retention.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) suggests that workplace relationships are built on reciprocal exchanges between employees and their organization. When employees perceive fair treatment, they develop loyalty and commitment [14]. However, negative leadership disrupts this balance, leading to disengagement and reduced performance [17].

In fast-food environments, where employees often work under high-pressure conditions, SET is particularly relevant. Workers expect a balanced exchange where their contributions are acknowledged and reciprocated with tangible and intangible benefits, such as career growth opportunities, respectful treatment, and emotional support [35]. When these expectations are unmet, employees may withhold effort, disengage, or even leave their positions. Research further highlights that the breakdown of this reciprocal relationship can lead to increased absenteeism, lower productivity, and heightened turnover intentions, particularly in industries with high employee mobility, such as fast food [26].

SET research underscores the importance of fostering supportive leadership and cultivating positive relationships within organizations. By focusing on creating equitable exchanges, managers can mitigate the negative effects of high job demands and stressful environments, promoting job satisfaction and long-term employee retention [14].

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

JD-R suggests that excessive demands, when not offset by resources, lead to stress and poor performance. In the fast-food industry, this imbalance is prevalent [15,26]. For example, employees working in understaffed shifts with unclear guidance from managers may experience heightened stress levels, which not only diminishes their performance but also increases turnover intentions [31]. Conversely, when job resources are abundant, such as opportunities for development, managerial recognition, and emotional support, employees are more resilient to workplace stressors and are likely to exhibit higher levels of satisfaction and productivity [10]. The JD-R model also underscores the importance of tailoring resources to address specific job demands. For instance, fast food employees might benefit from initiatives like structured schedules, better training programs, or team-building activities to enhance collaboration and reduce stress. By proactively addressing the imbalance between demands and resources, organizations can improve employee engagement and retention, ensuring sustainable performance in high-pressure settings [4].

4.2 Organizational Support Theory (OST)

Organizational Support Theory (OST) highlights the role of perceived organizational support (POS) in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors. When employees feel valued and supported by their organization, their performance and engagement improve [7,10].

OST emphasizes that POS acts as a mediator between leadership practices and employee outcomes. Supportive leadership not only improves workplace morale but also enhances organizational commitment and individual performance [34]. In the context of this research, fostering POS through consistent communication, employee recognition, and adequate training programs can mitigate the negative impacts of toxic leadership behaviors and high job demands, ultimately driving better performance [21].

A meta-analysis by Kurtessis *et al.*, [21] found that POS is strongly linked to job satisfaction, employee well-being, and organizational commitment. Organizations that prioritize employee support can reduce burnout, enhance motivation, and improve overall workplace dynamics.

5. Proposed Conceptual Framework

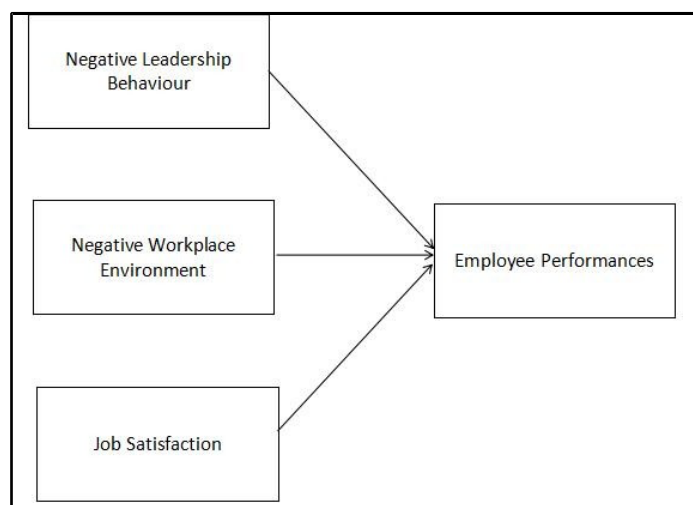


Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this research delineates the links among negative leadership behavior, atmospheric conditions at the workplace, satisfaction with one's job, and the performances of an employee. It outlines the potential reasons that influence employee performances in the fast food restaurants sector while addressing direct relationships of these variables. The objective of this model is to give an insight into the dynamics of the organization which affects individuals and performance in general.

Therefore, researchers suggested:

H1: Negative leadership behavior has a significant negative influence on employee performance in Malaysia's fast-food industry. Specifically, when employees experience leadership styles characterized by authoritarianism, lack of support, or toxic managerial practices, their motivation and engagement decrease, leading to lower productivity and overall performance.

H2: Workplace environment has a significant influence on employee performance in Malaysia's fast-food industry. A positive workplace atmosphere, including factors such as clear communication, teamwork, and managerial support, fosters employee efficiency and job satisfaction, directly improving their ability to perform effectively in a fast-paced work setting.

H3: Job satisfaction has a significant influence on employee performance in Malaysia's fast-food industry. Employees who experience high job satisfaction, driven by fair compensation, recognition, and a sense of belonging within the organization, are more likely to exhibit high productivity, strong commitment, and enhanced overall performance.

6. Implication and Future Research

This conceptual paper has significant implications for both theory and practice within the fast-food and broader hospitality sectors in Malaysia. Theoretically, the integration of Social Exchange Theory (SET), Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, and Organizational Support Theory (OST) offers a multi-dimensional understanding of how negative leadership, adverse workplace conditions, and job dissatisfaction converge to influence employee performance. It bridges gaps in existing research by contextualizing these theories within Malaysia's fast-paced service environment, especially among operational employees in Kedah - a population that remains underrepresented in hospitality research [30,31].

From a practical standpoint, the findings stress the urgent need for organizations to foster positive leadership behaviors, enhance employee-manager relationships, and invest in creating supportive and well-designed work environments. Leadership training programs should be implemented to minimize toxic behaviors and promote emotionally intelligent leadership, which has been shown to improve employee satisfaction and engagement [31]. Additionally, workplace audits focusing on communication flow, workload distribution, and physical workspace quality can be instrumental in identifying and mitigating sources of stress and dissatisfaction [9,24].

For future research, scholars are encouraged to empirically validate the proposed conceptual framework using quantitative methods such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) or Partial Least Squares (PLS). Longitudinal studies may also explore moderating variables such as gender, age, job tenure, or organizational size, which could influence the strength of relationships between leadership behavior, job satisfaction, and performance. Furthermore, qualitative approaches such as interviews or focus groups with fast-food employees in urban and rural settings could uncover rich insights into lived experiences, thereby strengthening the contextual applicability of the model [35].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper presents a comprehensive conceptual framework that links negative leadership behaviors, workplace environment, and job satisfaction to employee performance within the Malaysian fast-food context. Drawing on robust theoretical foundations and recent empirical insights, it identifies critical factors contributing to high turnover, low morale, and declining service quality. The study fills an existing gap in hospitality literature by focusing on operational employees in an under-researched regional setting and offers a valuable starting point for future empirical inquiry.

Addressing the issues outlined requires both managerial and systemic change. Organizations that prioritize psychological safety, fairness, and support will not only retain talent but also foster a high-performing and motivated workforce. Given the rapid expansion and competitive nature of the fast-food industry, aligning leadership and workplace practices with employee well-being is no longer optional, it is essential. Future studies can further strengthen this framework and provide data-driven solutions to the enduring challenges faced by the hospitality workforce in Malaysia and beyond.

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