Toxic Leadership and Employee Misconduct of Hotel and Tourism Institution: A Frontline Perspective

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Abstract

This study determined the impact of Toxic Leadership on Employee Misconduct among frontline employees in restaurants within the Klang Valley, aiming to address persistent challenges in the hospitality sector. Employee Misconduct poses a significant threat to service-oriented cultures and financial stability. Specifically, this research explores how Toxic Leadership behaviors contribute to frontline employee misconduct, potentially exacerbating issues such as service quality and organizational reputation. Employing a quantitative approach, 120 questionnaires were distributed among frontline employees in various Klang Valley restaurants using non-probability purposive sampling. Correlation analysis of collected data indicated a statistically significant positive relationship between Toxic Leadership and employee misconduct ($r= .280$, $p<0.01$). These findings underscore the detrimental influence of toxic leadership on employee behavior within service settings. The study's outcomes contribute to a deeper understanding of organizational dynamics within the restaurant industry and the broader hospitality sector in Malaysia. By highlighting the prevalence and impact of Toxic Leadership, this research underscores the urgency for strategic interventions to mitigate employee misconduct and foster healthier work environments. Future research directions should explore additional facets of employee misconduct triggered by toxic leadership actions, offering insights for proactive management strategies and policy development in service-oriented industries.

Introduction

In recent years, the issue of toxic leadership has gained increasing attention due to its detrimental effects on employee behavior, organizational culture, and overall performance. Toxic leadership, often characterized by abusive, manipulative, or controlling behaviors, fosters a hostile work environment that can lead to negative psychological outcomes for employees (Alola, Avci, & Ozturen, 2018; Foulk, Lanaj, Tu, Erez, & Archambeau, 2018). The hospitality sector, especially frontline employees in restaurants, is particularly vulnerable to such dynamics due to its highly interactive and customer-driven nature (Jin, Kim, & DiPietro, 2020). In this context, toxic leadership not only undermines employee well-being but also contributes to employee misconduct, which further disrupts service quality and organizational stability (Tziner, Bar-Mor, Geva, Levi, & Shkoler, 2021). Toxic leadership refers to behaviors by individuals in leadership positions that negatively impact their subordinates and the organization as a

Significance | This study's significance lies in revealing how toxic leadership influences employee misconduct, crucial for improving hospitality workplace cultures and performance.

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whole. Such leaders often employ aggressive tactics, exhibit controlling tendencies, and may publicly humiliate or manipulate employees to exert control (Kim & Qu, 2019). These behaviors create an environment of distrust, emotional exhaustion, and disengagement among employees (Sguera, Bagozzi, Huy, Boss, & Boss, 2018). Research has shown that toxic leadership is a key factor in fostering negative workplace behaviors, such as employee misconduct, which includes acts of deviance, poor service delivery, and unethical practices (Scherer & Moors, 2019; Eissa, Lester, & Gupta, 2019).

In the hospitality sector, frontline employees are the face of the organization, interacting directly with customers and playing a pivotal role in the overall service experience. When subjected to toxic leadership, these employees are more likely to engage in misconduct as a coping mechanism for the emotional strain they face (Heikkila, 2019). This can manifest in various forms, including absenteeism, poor service quality, and in extreme cases, sabotage or theft (Arasli, Namin, & Abubakar, 2018).

The financial impact of toxic leadership cannot be understated. Employee misconduct resulting from toxic leadership behaviors can lead to direct financial losses for organizations through reduced productivity, customer dissatisfaction, and increased turnover (Scherrer & Moors, 2019). For restaurants, where customer service is critical, the implications are particularly severe, as misconduct directly affects service quality, customer retention, and ultimately, profitability (Farooq, Salam, Fayolle, Jaafar, & Ayupp, 2018).

The General Strain Theory (GST) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between toxic leadership and employee misconduct. GST posits that negative emotions, such as anger or frustration, resulting from workplace strain, drive individuals to engage in deviant behavior as a way of coping (Brezina, 2017). In the context of the hospitality sector, frontline employees may perceive toxic leadership as a significant stressor, leading to misconduct as a response to the negative emotions generated by their interactions with toxic supervisors (Chi & Liang, 2013).

While the existing literature has explored the effects of toxic leadership in various sectors, there is limited research focused on its impact within the hospitality industry, particularly among frontline employees in restaurants (Tuzun & Kalemci, 2018). Given the critical role that frontline employees play in maintaining service quality, understanding how toxic leadership influences their behavior is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate its negative effects (Cowan, 2018). This study aims to address the gap by investigating the relationship between toxic leadership and employee misconduct among frontline employees in restaurants located in the Klang Valley. Specifically, it seeks to identify the impact of toxic leadership behaviors on employee misconduct and explore the extent to which toxic leadership contributes to service

disruptions and financial losses within the hospitality sector (Cho, Bonn, Han, & Lee, 2016).

By presenting the prevalence of toxic leadership and its negative consequences, this research contributes to the broader understanding of organizational dynamics in the hospitality industry and underscores the need for effective management strategies to foster healthier work environments (Alola, Olugbade, Avci, & Öztüren, 2019; Sakurai, 2021).

Materials and Methods

Study Design and Approach

This research employed a quantitative, correlational research design to investigate the relationship between toxic leadership and employee misconduct among frontline employees in restaurants located within the Klang Valley region. The study's main objective was to assess how toxic leadership behaviors affect workplace misconduct (figure 1). A correlational design was selected as it enabled the measurement of the strength and direction of the association between the two key variables toxic Leadership and Employee Misconduct through statistical analysis.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study comprised frontline employees working in restaurants across shopping malls in Klang Valley, Malaysia. These employees were chosen due to their direct interactions with both customers and supervisors, making them particularly vulnerable to the impacts of leadership behaviors. A sample size of 107 respondents was determined based on a total population of 120 frontline employees. Non-probability purposive sampling was applied to select participants who could provide relevant insights into the research questions. This method was deemed appropriate as it ensured the selection of individuals directly exposed to leadership behaviors, making them ideal candidates for this investigation.

Data Collection

Data were gathered using a self-administered questionnaire. Out of the 125 distributed questionnaires, 118 were returned. After eliminating 11 responses due to incomplete answers or straight-lining (where respondents selected the same option for all questions), the final sample consisted of 107 usable responses. The questionnaire was divided into three sections:

Demographics: Collected data on gender, age, working hours, and work experience.

Toxic Leadership: Adapted from Cotnia (2001), this section assessed toxic leadership behaviors, including abusive supervision, public criticism, and emotional manipulation.

Employee Misconduct: Measured deviant behaviors such as absenteeism, workplace vandalism, and neglect of customer service.

Table. 1. Demographic profile

Variables	Categories	Frequencies	Percentage
Age of respondent	16 to 25 years old	79	73.8
	26 to 30 years old	28	26.2
Gender of respondent	Male	57	53.3
	Female	50	46.7
Race of respondent	Chinese	16	15.0
	Malay	38	35.5
	Indian	28	26.2
	International	25	23.4
Mood of work	Full time	42	39.3
	per time	65	60.7
Working experience	1 to 6 months	19	17.8
	7 months to 1 year	77	72.0
	2 to 3 years	11	10.3
Working per day	5 to 10 hours	66	61.7
	11 to 15 hours	41	38.3

Table 2. Interpretation of Correlation Coefficient (Cohen, 1988)

Degree of Correlation	R-values
Small	-0.10 to -0.291 and +0.101 to +0.29
Medium	-0.30 to -0.491 and +0.301 to +0.49
Large	-0.50 to – 1.001 and +0.501 to +1.00

Table 3. Correlations coefficients between Toxic Leadership and Employee Misconduct among the participants.

Correlations		Toxic Leadership	Employee Misconduct
Toxic Leadership	Pearson Correlation	1	.280**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	107	107
Employee Misconduct	Pearson Correlation	.280**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	107	107

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*
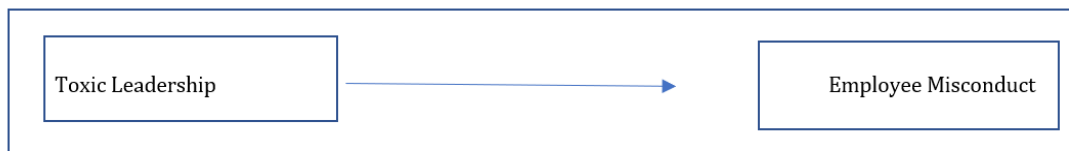

Fig 1. Research framework

Each section utilized a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to capture the participants' perceptions and experiences.

Variables

The study's independent variable was Toxic Leadership, operationalized through the following indicators:

Public criticism by supervisors, Use of insults or humiliating tactics, Emotional manipulation.

The dependent variable, Employee Misconduct, was assessed by measuring behaviors such as:

Absenteeism, Negligence in customer service and Participation in deviant activities like vandalism or spreading rumors.

Data Analysis

SPSS (version 25) was used for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, including percentages and frequencies, summarized the demographic data. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that toxic leadership significantly correlates with employee misconduct. Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r): Measured the strength and direction of the relationship between toxic leadership and employee misconduct. P-value ($p<0.01$): Tested the statistical significance of the relationship, with a significance level set at 0.01.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical guidelines, ensuring participants were informed about the research's purpose, their rights to confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and no personal identifiers were collected to maintain anonymity.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The study's demographic profile (table 1) reveals that 53.3% of the respondents were male and 46.7% female, highlighting a slightly higher male representation. A majority of the respondents (73.8%) were between 16 to 25 years old, followed by 26.2% aged 26 to 30 years. This indicates that the participants primarily belonged to Generation Y, a demographic commonly involved in frontline positions in the hospitality industry (Alola, Olugbade, Avci, & Öztüren, 2019).

Regarding working hours, 61.7% of the employees reported working between 5 to 10 hours per day, while 38.3% worked for 11 to 15 hours (table 2). This high workload, typical of the service sector, may exacerbate stress and contribute to the effects of Toxic Leadership (Foulk, Lanaj, Tu, Erez, & Archambeau, 2018) . In terms of work experience, 72.0% of the respondents had 7 months to 1 year of experience, followed by 17.8% with 2 to 3 years, and 10.3% with more than 3 years of experience. This distribution suggests that most employees in the sample were relatively new to their roles,

which may make them more vulnerable to negative leadership behaviors (Kim & Qu, 2019).

Hypothesis Testing and Correlation Analysis

The study aimed to test the hypothesis that Toxic Leadership significantly correlates with Employee Misconduct among frontline employees in restaurants within Klang Valley. Pearson's correlation analysis (table 3) revealed a small but statistically significant positive relationship between Toxic Leadership and Employee Misconduct ($r = 0.280$, $p < 0.01$). The result suggests that as toxic leadership behaviors increase, so does employee misconduct, supporting the research hypothesis (Rice, Letwin, Taylor, & Wo, 2020).

This positive correlation aligns with previous studies, which have shown that toxic leadership behaviors, such as verbal abuse, public criticism, and emotional manipulation, can lead to retaliatory behaviors from employees, including misconduct and deviant acts (Sguera, Bagozzi, Huy, Boss, & Boss, 2018). These behaviors can manifest as reduced work effort, intentional mistakes, absenteeism, and even sabotage, which are harmful to both organizational culture and financial performance (Alola, Avci, & Ozturen, 2018).

Toxic Leadership and Its Consequences

The findings also indicate that frontline employees subjected to toxic leadership often exhibit symptoms of emotional exhaustion and psychological distress, which, in turn, result in various forms of workplace misconduct (Haider, Nisar, Baig, & Azeem, 2018). Being directly exposed to customers and under constant supervision, frontline employees are particularly susceptible to incivility from supervisors, which further escalates the problem (Heikkila, 2019).

Notably, this study's findings align with existing literature, suggesting that toxic leadership can spiral into more severe forms of misconduct, including aggression and violence. Such misconduct not only undermines workplace productivity but also has a profound impact on employees' mental and physical well-being (Jin, Kim, & DiPietro, 2020). Moreover, organizations experiencing high levels of toxic leadership are likely to suffer from decreased employee morale, reduced voluntary efforts, and increased turnover rates (Sguera, Bagozzi, Huy, Boss, & Boss, 2016).

Managerial Implications

The study emphasizes the critical need for restaurants and other service-oriented businesses to address Toxic Leadership through proactive management strategies. Effective leadership training programs should be implemented to mitigate toxic behaviors in the workplace, especially in the hospitality industry, where service quality directly affects business performance (Torres, Van Niekerk, & Orlowski, 2017). Management should foster open communication and create a supportive work environment that encourages employees to report any misconduct or toxic behavior without fear of retaliation (Cho, Bonn, Han, & Lee, 2016).

Conclusion

The study concludes that toxic leadership significantly contributes to employee misconduct in the hospitality industry, particularly among frontline employees in Klang Valley restaurants. The correlation between toxic leadership and misconduct (r=.280, p<0.01) indicates that employees who experience abusive supervision are more likely to engage in deviant behaviors as a form of retaliation. Such behaviors can lead to negative organizational outcomes, including reduced productivity, poor service quality, and potential financial losses. The findings highlight the urgent need for managerial training and interventions to address toxic leadership, foster healthier work environments, and mitigate employee misconduct. By improving the relationship between supervisors and employees, organizations can enhance employee well-being, reduce turnover, and maintain competitive advantage. Future research should explore broader aspects of toxic leadership across different sectors to develop proactive strategies that ensure sustainable organizational growth and employee satisfaction.

Author contributions

T.I. conceptualized the project, developed the methodology, conducted a formal analysis, and drafted the original writing. M.N.I. and M.B.Z. contributed to the methodology, conducted investigations, provided resources, and visualized the data. S.D. contributed to the reviewing and editing of the writing.

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Competing financial interests

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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