

Coping Strategies Among White-Collar Employees in Malaysia Affected by Toxic Leadership

George Visuvasam, Julie* and Jeffrey Khong Loong, Yee²

¹ Harimatec Malaysia Sdn. Bhd., Lot 62049, Jalan Portland, Tasek Industrial Estate, 31400 Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia

² Faculty of Business and Management, Quest International University, No.227, Jalan Raja Permaisuri Bainun, 30250 Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: jgvizzie@gmail.com

Abstract: The competitive nature of organizations has contributed to the increase in toxic leadership experiences by employees in Malaysia, which is slowly leading to the increase of mental health issues among employees. This trend requires employees to use effective coping strategies when dealing with toxic leaders. Previous research has found a high prevalence of toxic experiences among employees in Malaysia and to cope, employees are using ingratiation, support seeking, avoidance of contact and reframing. This research uses a cross-sectional study and survey to understand the prevalence of toxic leadership experiences and the type of coping strategies preferred by white-collar employees in Malaysia. A total of 277 responses were collected. Descriptive and One-way ANOVA statistics were carried out. Contrary to previous findings, this research uncovers that toxic leadership is only moderately experienced in Malaysia. The most preferred coping strategy is reframing while strategies like ingratiation, support-seeking and avoidance of contact are only moderately used by white-collar employees. Since toxic leadership exists in organizations in Malaysia, the management need to explore and implement ways to reduce the impact to its employees, while using training and soft skill enhancement to improve leadership in organizations.

Keyword: Toxic leadership, coping strategies, reframing, white-collar employees

INTRODUCTION

This research is conducted to determine the type of coping strategies used by white-collar employees whilst working with toxic leaders in Malaysia. This section will cover the research background and the problem statement, which is followed by the research objectives and research questions to achieve the objectives. The section will conclude after the significance of study is clarified.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Fritzon et al. (2016) in Brooks et al. (2020) conducted a research on 261 business experts working in the supply chain management field and found that 21 percent of these experts had clinically substantial degree of psychopathic attributes. These findings are supported by Priesemuth (2020) who concur that many employees are facing toxic supervisors at work and about 10% of supervisors are identified as psychopath bosses. Singh, Sengupta and Dev (2018) therefore commented that these findings could indicate that toxic leadership is becoming more prevalent than currently thought of. Omar et al. (2015) discovered that in Malaysia, bullying incidents resulting from negative or toxic leadership is also prevalent through their study that involves 112 public service employees. 83% of the respondents experienced toxic behaviours such as given tasks that were unreasonable or with short deadlines, being shouted at and blamed for other's mistakes on a weekly or daily basis over a period of six months. Omar et al. (2015) also found that there was a significant positive relationship between toxic leadership and bullying behaviours. If toxic leadership is commonly experienced, bullying behaviours are as likely to be experienced.

According to Chua (2020), the Malaysian economy is expected to be burdened by escalating costs due to increasing mental health conditions among employees in the workplace. Chua (2020) stated that in 2018 alone, the impact is estimated to be MYR14.46 billion as shown below.

Figure 1

Estimated 2018 costs of mental health conditions in Malaysia in terms of absenteeism, presenteeism (working while unwell), and staff turnover.

	Estimate
Size of labour force	15-23 million
Mean daily wage	RM134
Mean number of days in absenteeism per worker, per year	8
Mean number of days in presenteeism per worker, per year	62
Mean staff turnover, per year	2.4 million
Total cost of absenteeism due to mental health conditions	RM3.28 billion
Total cost of presenteeism due to mental health conditions	RM9.84 billion
Total cost of staff turnover due to mental health conditions	RM1.34 billion

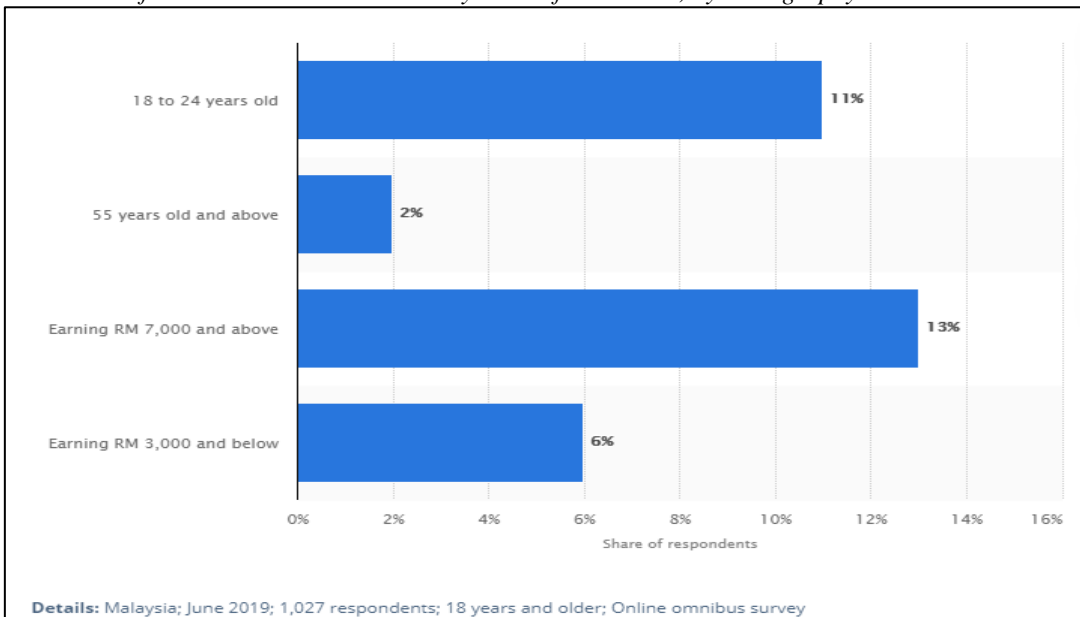
Table: Estimated 2018 costs of mental health conditions in Malaysia in terms of absenteeism, presenteeism (working while unwell), and staff turnover

Source: Chua (2020).

Hougaard (2018) and his team conducted a two-year research which involved 35,000 leaders, to uncover the truth behind the condition of leadership in companies in 100 countries. Data indicates that 50% of employees quit their jobs to literally run away from their superiors. These employees left when they realized that their superiors are wrecking their lives and causing psychological distress through their leadership. Malaysians are also facing similar workplace issues as Figure 2 below shows that mental health issues are noticeably higher among those working and earning above MYR7,000 in Malaysia in 2019.

Figure 2

Prevalence of mental health issues in Malaysia as of June 2019, by demography



Source: Statista (2021).

There has been a significant rise in the prevalence of mental health issues in Malaysia over the past decade (Raaj et al., 2021). A study done by AIA Vitality involving 11,000 Malaysian employees, uncovered that 50% of employees reported experiencing harmful job-related stress (Relate Malaysia, 2019). The National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019 also revealed that 2.3% of adults in Malaysia, which is about half a million people, are undergoing depression. The implication of toxic leadership to the mental health of employees was emphasized by a study done by Omar and Ahmad (2020), who revealed that academic staff working in public universities in Malaysia reported anxiety and depression while working with toxic leaders. According to bin Hassan et al. (2018), while studying the issues and challenges of mental health in Malaysia, they found that workplace stress is one of the root causes. Chan et al. (2019) studied the relationship between bullying

behaviours in the workplace and the mental health status of employees. The study involved 5235 respondents who are based in 47 different corporate organizations in Malaysia. 39.1% of respondents, which is one in every three employees, reported having experienced harmful behaviours and thus experiencing psychological distress. The findings also showed that higher income employees, who most likely are white-collar employees, reported more of this mistreatment.

Toxic leadership can create a very stressful work environment for employees. To avoid psychological distress that leads to mental health issues, employees need to find ways to cope with toxic leaders. Coping with toxic leadership is usually spontaneous, not intentional, adaptive, and varies according to the intensity of negative impact faced by the victims. Toxic leaders' characteristics and behaviours can make it very difficult both for the organization and the employees (Kurtulmuş, 2020). Morris (2019) who conducted a study on coping strategies and behaviours of employees working with a toxic leader found that employees need help to cope with toxic leaders.

At the initial stage of exposure, the employees who were still shocked and felt betrayed by their leaders, were using coping strategies that provided fewer desirable outcomes. Only with the support from external sources such as professionals did they report a more satisfying outcome. This finding is supported by Bhandarker and Rai (2019), who also found that employees first feel agitated due to emotional distress. They then become withdrawn and finally experience a loss of self-worth which is considered the highest level of emotional distress. At this stage they start to have the tendency to give up and even though they are physically present in the organization, they do not contribute to the growth of the organization. This therefore shows that issues revolving around toxic leadership are becoming of interest to many researchers.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although there are many studies on toxic leadership, research is still lacking on how employees cope while dealing with toxic leaders. In Malaysia, research seems to be focused on the prevalence of toxic leadership (Omar et al., 2015), the impact to employee's well-being (Omar & Ahmad, 2018) and the impact to job performance (Razali, 2020). Moreover, the majority of the studies that are available on coping with toxic leaders have been conducted in the Western setting, that are low in power distance index (PDI) and are individualists. Neall and Tuckey (2014) conducted a methodological review of research on negative workplace behaviours. Their research consists of 234 samples that was collected from 224-peer reviewed articles spanning over a period of 26 years (1987-2012). The review indicated that almost 95% of the research was done in Western countries and the scales used were based on Western cultural perspectives. Kwan et al. (2020) in citing Neall and Tuckey (2014) stated that the role of culture has been overlooked and thus the findings generated from Western based research may not be able to be generalized to employees working in Eastern countries.

According to Islam and Army (2021), Malaysia, an Asian country, is high in power distance index (PDI) and has a collectivist culture. Chun et al. (2006) explains that culture is a basic framework that shapes both the environment and the individual that appraises it. The extent to which an individual feels he/she has control over his/her life and the environment is also shaped by cultural values. Collectivism causes an individual to appraise stressors as more of a threat than a challenge, which contrasts with individualism. Individualism drives individuals to control and change the external environment, while collectivism drives the individual to control or change his/her emotions, standpoint, and actions. These findings by Chun et al. (2006) are supported by Ang and Liang (2021) who discovered that individuals who are collectivist in nature are bound to use specific types of coping to manage their emotions when dealing with stressful situations through their study that involves respondents from Malaysia and Singapore. This indicates that cultural differences may influence the type of coping strategies preferred and therefore further research needs to be done in a Malaysian setting to increase knowledge of coping styles preferred.

Additionally, Malaysia has been identified as having a PDI of 100, out of a scale from 1 to 120 (Low et al., 2021). This finding may indicate that employees cope with the impact of toxic leadership behaviour by just tolerating the day-to-day ordeal in the workplace in organizations with strong hierarchical structures as they believe this is beyond their control and they still need to continue their tenure in the organization. This eventually leads to employee silence which in the long run affects organizational performance. In Malaysia, the prevalence of workplace bullying is not highlighted as compared to other countries (Omar et al., 2015).

Yuzana and Martin (2017) found that only 1 out of 11 respondents from a health care organization reported the incident faced, thus concluding that "forced tolerance" was prevalent as very low reporting culture was observed. They also found during their research that this data is considered sensitive by Malaysians and thus they feel reluctant to share experiences. To close the gap, the present study will identify the coping strategies used by white-collar employees in Malaysia. Survey/questionnaire is used so that respondents remain anonymous, thus encouraging respondents to share their coping experiences.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overall objective of this study is to determine the type of coping strategies used by white-collar employees when they are exposed to toxic leaders in Malaysia. The research question is “What are the types of coping strategies used by white-collar employees when they are exposed to toxic leaders in Malaysia?”

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Through this present study, knowledge will be obtained on the types of coping strategies preferred by Malaysian employees, which will then provide an indication if the coping strategies utilized can break the vicious cycle or initiate a ripple effect. Appropriate actions can be taken by Human Resource (HR) practitioners to halt the toxic cycle for example, by implementing performance appraisal using 360-degree feedback whereby employees in the organizations are evaluated by self, superiors, peers, and subordinates. The feedback can be used by HR to develop effective counter measures (Gaur & Rajendra, 2021) as well as to create a much healthier work environment in organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, the variables used in this research will be defined, work done by other researchers will be reviewed, theoretical models detailed, and a conceptual framework constructed.

TOXIC LEADERSHIP AND ITS IMPACT

Milosevic et al. (2020) suggest that toxic leaders interfere with their subordinates' capability to carry out their tasks. This definition is supported by Indradevi (2016) who describes toxic leadership as a silent killer like the venom of a snake, that could diminish the creative energy displayed by employees in an organization.

Milosevic et al. (2020) also noted that many researchers have used the phrase toxic and destructive leadership interchangeably. Also, Baskan (2020) considers toxic leadership as an umbrella term that comprises of many harmful and negative leadership styles such as workplace bullying and abusive supervision. Burns (2017) citing Pelletier (2010), identified common negative traits in abusive, bullying, tyrannical, destructive, and toxic leadership styles. The research done by Burns (2017) provides the understanding that there is an overlap in traits related to toxic leadership styles and in most harmful or negative leadership styles, thus justifying the usage of these terms interchangeably.

Burns (2017) adds on that some common traits among toxic leaders include attacking the self-esteem of employees through ridiculing comments such as asking if that was the best the employee could do, lack of integrity as toxic leaders is considered deceptive and usually take credit for others work and use scapegoats to cover their mistakes (see Table 1). If an employee is not favorable or is prone to go against his/her words, the toxic leader will intentionally overlook that employee in good projects or company activities. On the contrary, the toxic leader shows favoritism to employees in his/her favour. Toxic leaders also expect their subordinates to work long hours, are inflexible and adamant that a task must be completed according to his/her way and sometimes jokingly makes comments that imply threat to employees' job security.

Table 1*Commonalities in selected harmful leadership styles*

TRAITS	LEADERSHIP STYLES		
	ABUSIVE	BULLYING	TOXIC
Demeaning/marginalizing, or degrading	X	X	X
Ridiculing/mocking	X	X	X
Social exclusion	X	X	X
Ostracizing/disenfranchising employee			X
Inciting employee to chastise another		X	X
Exhibiting favoritism	X		
Harassment (including sexual)	X	X	
Emotional volatility	X	X	
Coercion	X		X
Using physical acts of aggression		X	X
Threatening employees' job security		X	X
Forcing people to endure hardships		X	X
Being deceptive/lying	X		X
Blaming others for the leader's mistakes	X	X	X
Taking credit for others' work		X	
Pitting in-group members against out-group members			X
Ignoring comments/ideas			X
Acting disengaged			
Stifling dissent			X
Being rigid			X
Presenting toxic agendas as noble visions			X

Source: Burns (2017).

Korn Ferry (2018) in Lipman (2019) conducted a survey and found that stress related to workplace is continuing to rise to a disturbing 20% in three decades. 35% of participants indicated that the biggest contributor to workplace stress is the immediate manager. Another 80% of participants stated that when a new manager is hired, stress levels increase due to the likelihood that the new manager creates changes within the organization. Personal relationships of 76% of participants was impacted, while 66% dealt with insomnia and 16% left their jobs. This situation is also prevalent in Malaysia. A study done by Wee et al. (2019) among workers from 47 private companies revealed that 63.2% reported being unwell due to work stress which could be partly due to the immediate manager. Omar and Ahmad (2020) found that academic staff working in public universities in Malaysia were experiencing psychological distress while working with toxic leaders.

D'Cruz et al. (2016) studied the impact of employees who have dealt with negative behaviour from leaders and classified the impact into two categories: person-related and task-related. Person-related impact occurs when employees are being passed over in important projects or career advancement, being compared to other colleagues usually in a disapproving way, being gossiped about or being called names. Task-related examples provided by respondents were being micromanaged and being forced to take up jobs that are unmanageable or unethical. This finding correlates with a study conducted by Omar and Ahmad (2018). In their study on toxic leadership amongst public sector employees in Sabah, they find a positive relationship exists between employees' psychological distress and exposure to toxic leadership. This is further emphasized by Bhandarker and Rai (2019), who discovered that many research link harmful outcomes to toxic leadership. In their study, they found that a person experiencing psychological distress due to toxic leadership, displays warning signs of mental imbalance such as, feeling sad, depressed, agitated, tensed, frustrated, easily irritated and constantly anxious.

Thus, it is not surprising that toxic leadership can lead to high employee turnover. This was observed in the study in a South African construction company whereby a relationship was found on psychological well-being, self-esteem, job

satisfaction and intention to leave (Bowen et al., 2021). This problem was also found in Malaysia. Wee et al. (2019) revealed stress as one of the reasons for absenteeism and presenteeism in private companies.

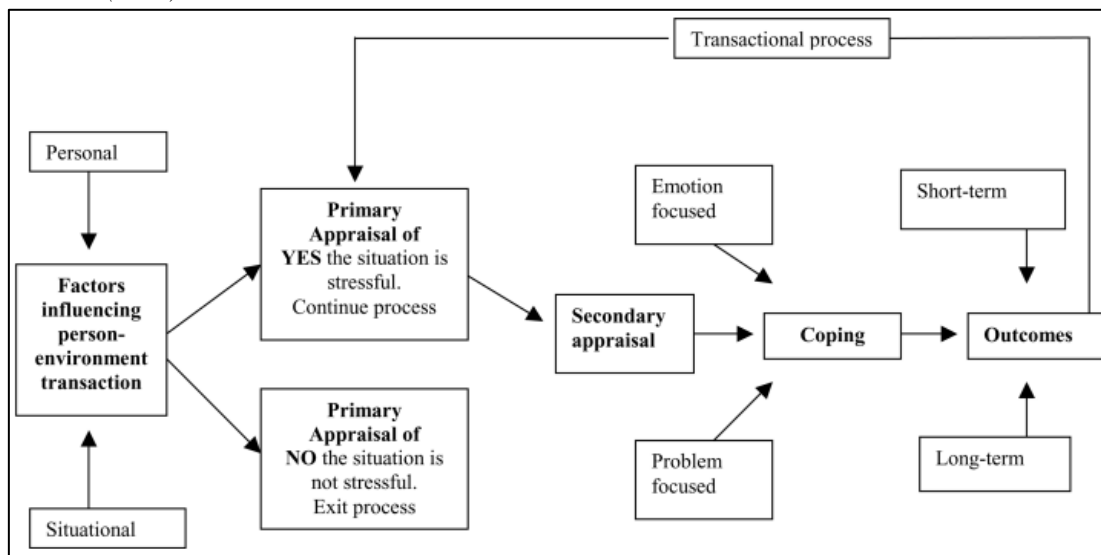
THEORETICAL MODEL

Several theoretical models have been developed regarding coping strategies. However, the majority of the researchers who are researching coping styles have built their conceptual framework based on Lazarus and Folkman's TTSC. TTSC has also been used in management and work-related studies. Therefore, the TTSC is selected as it is relevant and sufficient for the scope of this research. Lazarus and Folkman's study led to the development of the transactional theory of stress and coping which became fundamental in furthering the studies on stress and coping over the years.

Figure 3 demonstrates a process that happens in a person-environment transaction involving a stressful situation. According to Schuster et al. (2006), stressful situations motivate an individual to participate in the process. Factors that influence the transaction can be situational or personal. Situational factors that affect the person-environment transaction can be the direct surroundings or the duration. Personal factors on the other hand are things that the individual brings, such as past experiences. The basis that is used by the individual for cognitive appraisal of the event or situations is formed by the individual's perception of these factors.

Figure 3

Transactional Stress/Coping Model Used to Guide the Current Research Based on the Theory Developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984).



Source: Schuster et al. (2006).

Appraisal involves evaluating the information that an individual has and interpreting it to understand the implication to the individual's well-being. Primary appraisal involves evaluation if a person-environment transaction is significant to the well-being of the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Secondary appraisal involves evaluation if there are any actions that can be taken to improve the person-environment transaction and to select which coping strategies can be used to reduce the distress from the stressor.

Smith and Lazarus (1990) also suggests that individuals are expected to use more than one coping strategy. Selection of coping strategy is suspected to be most likely to be influenced by belief that are normally culturally defined. This is supported by Stephenson and DeLongis (2020) who found that culture influences the choice of coping strategies. Therefore, related studies emphasize that people may have different coping strategies.

COPING STRATEGIES

Webster et al. (2016) in citing Skinner et al. (2003), defined coping as an adaptive process, that drives individuals to take actions intentionally or unconsciously to respond to stressful situations. Stephenson and DeLongis (2020) further elaborates that coping is a dynamic process that may require the usage of different strategies at different stages of the stressor. When referring to stressors in the workplace, coping can be understood as how employees adapt to their roles at work and the demands associated with their roles. These demands will become stressors when they exceed the capabilities of employees, which then leads to psychological distress. To reduce the strain from workplace stressors, employees use coping strategies (Schaufeli, 2015).

Individuals cope using problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies (Folkman, 1984). Stanisławski (2019) builds on this by noting that when employees find themselves in stressful situations, they are challenged with two tasks, to solve the problem that they are facing and to keep their emotions in check. Menéndez-Espina et al. (2019) elaborates that problem-focused strategies are used when the individual perceives that the source of the stress has a possibility to change. Emotion-focused strategies, on the other hand, are aimed to regulate the emotions of individuals when they perceive that the stressful condition will not change. Table 2 summarizes the types of coping strategies available.

Table 2*Types of coping strategies available*

MAIN SOURCE	COPING STRATEGIES
Folkman & Lazarus (1980, 1988)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confrontive Coping • Distancing • Self-controlling • Seeking Social Support • Accepting Responsibility • Escape-Avoidance • Planful Problem Solving • Positive Reappraisal
Vitaliano et al. (1985)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem-Focused • Seeks Social Support • Blamed Self • Wishful Thinking • Avoidance
Carver et al. (1989)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active coping • Planning • Suppression of competing activities • Restraint coping • Seeking social support—instrumental • Seeking social support—emotional • Positive reinterpretation and growth • Acceptance • Turning to religion • Focus on and venting of emotions • Denial • Mental disengagement

MAIN SOURCE	COPING STRATEGIES
Endler & Parker (1990a, 1990b)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task oriented • Nontask oriented • Emotion Oriented • Avoidance Oriented (Distraction & Social Diversion)
Carver et al. (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active coping • Planning • Seeking social support—instrumental • Seeking social support—emotional • Positive reframing • Acceptance • Humour • Religion • Self-distraction • Denial • Venting • Substance use • Behavioral disengagement • Self-blame

MAIN SOURCE	COPING STRATEGIES
Connor-Smith et al. (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary Control Engagement Coping (Problem Solving/Emotional Regulation/Emotional Expression) • Secondary Control Engagement Coping (Positive Thinking/Cognitive Restructuring/ Acceptance) • Primary Control Disengagement Coping (Avoidance/Denial) • Secondary Control Disengagement Coping (Wishful Thinking/Distracted) • Involuntary Engagement (Rumination/Intrusive Thoughts/Psychological Arousal/Emotional Arousal/Involuntary Action) • Involuntary Disengagement (Emotional Numbing/Cognitive Interference/ Inaction/ Escape)
Yagil et al. (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ingratiation • Direct Communication • Avoidance of Contact • Support-Seeking • Reframing

Source: Kato (2015).

The following coping strategies were selected for this study because they related closely to Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (TTSC)

INGRATIATION

According to Lukacik and Bourdage (2019), ingratiation is a coping strategy associated with impression management. Employees try to become more likable especially to their toxic leaders by using flattery, giving compliments regularly or doing additional favours for their leaders with the notion of changing the impression of leaders towards them and hence gaining recognition and rewards. De Clercq et al. (2021) clarifies that using ingratiation can help employees to deal with leaders who are highly self-centered, not ethical and who gains achievement through the efforts of their subordinates. They further elaborate that for an employee to successfully pull off ingratiatory behaviours, he/she accepts that unequal power distance exists between leaders and their subordinates. Besides that, the employee must be highly motivated to perform actions that can change their leader's impression of them. Therefore, these factors help employees use ingratiation to make changes to the quality of work life and securing long-term career growth (De Clercq et al., 2021), thus making ingratiation a problem-focused coping strategy (Yagil et al., 2011).

Fitriastuti et al. (2021) found that when employees perceptions of organizational politics (POP) are high, they will engage in ingratiation behaviour and this helps them to achieve job satisfaction, as was also reported by Bhattarai (2021). To understand if organizational politics exists in Malaysia, a study done by Wan Hanafi and Daud (2021) which uses employees from 20 large Malaysian Government Link Companies (GLC) is referenced. The findings from this study indicate that organizational politics exists in these companies. Therefore, Malaysian employees may use ingratiation techniques to reduce the work stressors in their daily work.

H1: Ingratiation will be used as a type of coping strategy by employees in Malaysia when dealing with toxic leaders.

DIRECT COMMUNICATION

According to Karatuna (2015), when the toxic behaviour of leaders persists, employees will normally ignore them. However, when the mistreatment is sustained over a longer period, the employees might try to communicate directly with the leader to make the leader understand that his/her treatment is unfair. Therefore, direct communication is considered a problem-focused coping strategy as it aims to solve the situation by reducing abuse from the supervisor or eliminating the problem by creating a more positive attitude in the leader.

Employees raised in a high-power distance country will tend to be more obedient to higher authorities and therefore will not challenge or question seniors in high positions (Wang, 2021). At the individual level, power distance can also be used to interpret the extent to which an employee working in an organization accepts the unequal distribution of power in his/her organization (Gu et al., 2018). Wasserman et al (2019), who conducted research to understand the type of coping strategies preferred by police officers in South Africa over time, found that direct communication is the least preferred strategy. A similar conclusion was made by Yuzana and Martin (2017) who interviewed twelve employees in a clinical and non-clinical work environment in Malaysia experiencing mistreatment at work. They discovered that the fear of reprisal from the perpetrator and the belief that no action will be taken causes employees not to use direct communication.

Li (2020) on the other hand who conducted a comparison study on stress management in German and Chinese companies found that employees in German companies engage in direct verbal communication while employees in Chinese companies refrain from direct communication as they intend to "save face" (in Chinese "mian zi 面子"). This is influenced by the collectivist nature of the Chinese.

H2: Direct communication will not be used as a coping strategy by employees in Malaysia when dealing with toxic leaders.

AVOIDANCE OF CONTACT

Asici and Halil (2021) define avoidance coping as the behaviour of individuals who choose to block knowledge or information regarding negative leadership styles or engage in alternative actions such as social withdrawal, quitting and distraction. According to Karatuna (2015), avoidance is used when employees feel that they have underestimated the problem and feel powerless. They start to pretend to ignore the toxic leader by using humor or by keeping a distance from them. Yagil et al. (2011) categorized avoidance as an emotion-focused coping strategy. Hofmann and Hay (2018), building on Karatuna (2015), considered avoidance in general as a maladaptive coping strategy. Avoidance can be helpful in the short term, as it helps individuals to take a step back and stop negative thoughts from dominating their decision-making process.

Vogel et al.'s (2015) study revealed that employees in a Confucian Asian culture, like Japan, tend to perceive that toxic leader's abusive ways are fair. Adding to this finding, Peltokorpi (2018) suggested that owing to employees' perception of power distance, employees will not view abusive supervision as a stressor. Instead, they will use the avoidance strategy to cope. Ismail et al. (2021) conducted a study on coping strategies used by medical interns in Malaysia to handle

workplace stress. They found that the medical interns preferred to use problem-focused coping strategies (73.1%). Only a few (4.4%) resorted to use avoidance coping.

Nandkeolyar et al. (2014) examined the relationship between conscientiousness and coping strategies using respondents in India. Their findings show that conscientiousness has a positive relationship with active coping and negative relationship with avoidance coping. As the current study focuses on white-collar employees, it can be assumed that they may have higher levels of conscientiousness as well, and thus will not resort to using avoidance coping strategies.

H3: Avoidance of contact will not be used as a coping strategy by employees in Malaysia when dealing with toxic leaders.

SUPPORT SEEKING

Li (2015) states that seeking social support is one way to handle stress by asking for advice, simply expressing emotions, feelings or opinions or seeking resources from trusted individuals. According to Li et al. (2018), social support is a coping strategy that is related to how an individual views a particular situation and his/her relationships with others. Individuals will seek either instrumental or emotional support from others (Algorani & Gupta, 2021). Instrumental support provides the means to take actions and deal with stressors effectively while emotional support provides empathy and support that can help victims to manage the tension related to the stressor well (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007, in Srikanth, 2019). Pradhan and Jena (2018) discovered in their own research that when a victim of abusive supervision has the support of co-workers, the employee can reduce his/her stress level and emotional exhaustion, thus suggesting support seeking to be an effective coping strategy.

Yuzana and Martin (2017), observed that all the Malaysian respondents in their research on reporting culture of inappropriate behavior at work, would rather talk about their work issues with trusted friends and family members than reporting it formally. The respondents find that this can help alleviate their stress level. These findings clearly indicate that seeking support as a coping strategy is not affected by cultural differences.

H4: Support seeking will be used as a coping strategy by employees in Malaysia when dealing with toxic leaders.

REFRAMING

Reframing is an emotion-focused coping strategy that can be used to manage stress. Udod et al. (2021) defined reframing or reappraisal as a psychological method whereby one's standpoint of a stressful condition is intentionally altered to reduce the discomfort and anxiety being experienced until resilience is achieved. In his exploratory study of nurse manager's coping strategies to handle work stressors in rural Western Canada, Udod et al. (2021) found that nurses who approached stressful situations using a positive thinking mindset managed to build resilience and handle their work better. This finding was echoed in Sanhaji's (2021) study.

Reframing coping strategy can lessen employee's aggressive reaction when dealing with abusive or toxic leaders because it reduces feelings of anger and emotional exhaustion (Peng et al., 2020). Their study shows that reframing was related negatively to organizational deviance. Furthermore, they found that older employees use more reframing coping strategies compared to their younger counterparts. Older employees have a wealth of experience on the job, and they would have tried various coping strategies throughout their tenure. It is possible that older employees would have learned through experience that reframing is a more effective strategy to satisfy their expectations and achieve their goals at work. Cheras (2010) conducted a study involving correctional officers who were experiencing high levels of occupational stress in Kedah. The study revealed that coping strategies that were frequently used by the respondents were positive reframing and seeking support.

Dolcos et al. (2021) suggested that individuals tend to fall back to religion during times of adversity. When a person is religious, he/she spontaneously looks at a stressful situation as a challenge to their spiritual growth. They are then driven to handle the situation in a positive and calm manner while reaching out to a higher force for support and guidance. As Malaysia is a multiracial country, with diverse ethnic and religious groups, (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021), it is anticipated that employees in Malaysia may be able to practice reframing.

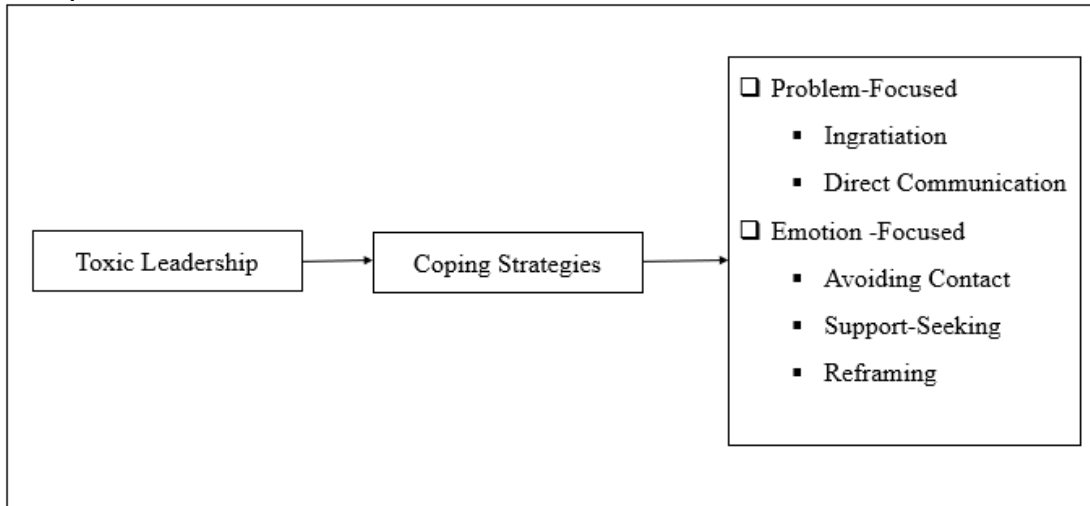
H5: Reframing will be used as a coping strategy by employees in Malaysia when dealing with toxic leaders.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 4 shows the conceptual framework for this research. The conceptual framework is built upon the interaction between actual toxic behaviour displayed by leader and employee's response by adopting coping strategies to deal with the toxic behaviour. When employees cope, they may use either problem-focused or emotion-focused coping which includes specific strategies such as ingratiation, direct communication, avoiding contact, support-seeking, and reframing.

Figure 4:

Conceptual Framework



METHODS

This section will define the methods that will be used to conduct the current research. Research design, the data collection method used, the scales adopted and the method to analyze the data collected is described.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research is a quantitative research whereby the positivist paradigm is used. Quantitative research focuses on factors that can be quantified and the positivist approach allows knowledge to be obtained through empirical testing (Rahman, 2016). This is a descriptive research, an attempt to describe individuals or situations accurately and systematically in their natural conditions without manipulating the variables. The unit of analysis in this research is the individual white-collar employees employed in Malaysia. This research is conducted as a cross-sectional study. The data collection was conducted between November to December 2021.

The survey questionnaire method is used in this research to address the research questions derived. The survey will be distributed via email or WhatsApp. The questionnaire will consist of three parts: Demographics, Toxic Leadership Experience and Coping Strategies.

Appendix A shows the questionnaire to be utilized in this research. Briefly, the survey questions include questions that can determine if the respondents have had an experience with toxic leaders. The scale used was established to measure workplace bullying by considering cultural differences and to provide a more accurate scale for Eastern countries. There are a total of 18 items in this section of the questionnaire. The final section of the questionnaire consists of questions that determine the type of coping strategies used by respondents. The questionnaire was adopted from Yagil et al. (2011). The scale consists of five sub-scales and is scored using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 0 ("Not used at all") to 4 ("Used to a large extent"). There are a total of 25 items in the questionnaire.

SAMPLING DESIGN

The number of employed persons in the country amounted to 15.6 million in 2019. Out of this, 27.5% were highly skilled and 29.6% were tertiary educated (TalentCorp Group of Companies, n.d.) Assumption was made that about 27.5% comprised of white-collar employees, which amounts to 4.29 million. The target population for this research will be white-collar employees working in Malaysia. As a descriptive research, the spread of samples is more important than collecting a

large number of samples. In addition, Roscoe (1975) states usage of sample size between 30 – 500 is recommended. Therefore, the sample size was determined at 200.

This research was approved by the University's Joint Ethics Committee at Quest International University (QIU). Respondents were provided a brief introduction and were requested to provide their informed consent to participate, thus making the participation voluntary. The researcher was not provided with any identifying information. Data sets were anonymized through restrictions set via Google Forms. Therefore, confidentiality was ensured. Convenience sampling was used because it is an efficient method and collection of data (Stratton, 2021).

In this study, white-collar employees working in Malaysia who are willing to participate will be approached. This was done by sending individuals on the mobile phone's contact list a link to the online questionnaire. Besides that, individuals who were connected via social networking websites such as Facebook, LinkedIn or people that are known in person were approached.

DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

Descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the important features of the data obtained in the study and to provide a simple summary from the questionnaire. The demographic data was identified and tabulated in terms of frequency and percentage relative to the sample (Cooksey, 2020). For the coping strategies scale, whereby each item was rated from 0 to 4 the ratings were dichotomized with a rating of 0 indicating that the coping strategy was not used and ratings of 1 to 4 indicates that the strategy has been used. One-way Anova was used to analyze if the categorical variables are associated or independent.

FINDINGS

A total of 277 responses were collected. The data was analyzed using SPSS software version 20. Respondent's demographic data is analyzed, and central tendencies measurement of constructs verified. Then the data was further analyzed using the One-Way Anova test to understand the association between the factors studied.

A pilot test was conducted with 30 responses. The reliability of the questionnaire is validated using Cronbach's Alpha. The Cronbach's Alpha interpretation used by Nawi et al. (2020) as shown in Table 3 was used to draw conclusions regarding the reliability of the questionnaire.

Table 3

Rule of Thumb on Cronbach Alpha

Alpha Coefficient Range	Strength of Association
<0.6	Poor
0.6 to <0.7	Moderate
0.7 to <0.8	Good
0.8 to <0.9	Very good
0.9>	Excellent

Source: Nawi et al. (2020)

Table 4 shows the Cronbach's Alpha results for the pilot test and actual study.

Table 4

Cronbach's Alpha for pilot test and actual study

Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (Pilot Test)	Cronbach's Alpha (actual study)
Toxic Leadership Experience (LE)	18	0.943	0.946
Ingratiation (IG)	5	0.823	0.837
Direct Communication (DC)	5	0.911	0.910
Support Seeking (SS)	5	0.895	0.891
Reframing (RF)	5	0.808	0.820
Avoidance of Contact (AC)	5	0.850	0.863

The results are consistent with the pilot study. All items have values above 0.800, thus indicating that they have a very good strength of association. Therefore, all the items in the questionnaire are concluded as reliable and acceptable. The

results show that all the items had values above 0.800, thus indicating that the questionnaire constructs were reliable and acceptable as they meet the inter-item consistency reliability standards.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

The respondents consist of almost of an equal number of males and females. 50.2% of the respondents are male while 49.8% are female. The respondents consist of Indians (43.7%), Chinese (32.5%), Malays (22.0%) and Others (1.8%). Others consist mainly of Bumiputera respondents. Most of the respondents have completed their bachelor's degree (48%) and their masters (24%). The remaining respondents have at least a diploma, foundation studies or secondary education. About 4.7% have earned their doctorate degree.

Most of the respondents have at least 10 – 19 years of working experience in the respective fields. Following this, 28.2% of respondents have worked at least 1 – 9 years, while 23.8% have working experience of 20 – 29 years. The remaining 11.2% of respondents have worked for more than 30 years. In terms of age, the majority of the respondents fall in the age group of 35 – 44 years, followed by <25 – 35 years and 45 – 54 years. There are also a small portion of respondents from the age groups of more than 55 years. This gives a good distribution of the various age groups which consists of millennials (21 -37 years), Generation X (38 – 53 years) and baby boomers (54 – 72 years) (Kurz et al., 2019).

The majority of the respondents are from the private sector. Only 23% of respondents are from the public sector. This is also contributed by convenience sampling used and no specific sectors were targeted for this research. The type of organizations that the respondents are attached to are distributed quite evenly. There are sufficient respondents representing multinational organizations and local organizations. Out of the 277 respondents, 30.3% are working in manufacturing-based organizations while 15.9% are working in healthcare and 10.5% in education-based organizations. There are a total of 16 types of organizations in which respondents are currently engaged in (see Table 5)

Table 5
Field of Organization

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Administration	16	5.8	5.8	5.8
Healthcare	44	15.9	15.9	21.7
Finance and insurance activities	27	9.7	9.7	31.4
Education	29	10.5	10.5	41.9
Electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply	15	5.4	5.4	47.3
Information and communication	13	4.7	4.7	52.0
Logistics	7	2.5	2.5	54.5
Manufacturing	84	30.3	30.3	84.8
Construction	11	4.0	4.0	88.8
Sales and Service	5	1.8	1.8	90.6
Agriculture, forestry, and fishing	3	1.1	1.1	91.7
Oil & gas	4	1.4	1.4	93.1
Legal	5	1.8	1.8	94.9
Wholesale and retail trade	6	2.2	2.2	97.1
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	2	.7	.7	97.8
Hotel/Tourism	6	2.2	2.2	100.0
Total	277	100.0	100.0	

TYPES OF TOXIC LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCED

To conduct further statistical analysis on toxic leadership experiences, the dichotomization used by Hawkins et al. (2021) is applied. The aim of dichotomization of the data is to help distinguish between incidences where toxic leadership

was never experienced (score “0”) and where toxic leadership was experienced (according to frequency, score is “1” to “4”, with “4” being everyday). From the analysis, the top five most experienced toxic leadership behaviour can be categorized as shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Top 5 Most Experienced Toxic Leadership Behaviour

Item No	Item Description	Type of Behaviour	Frequency/ %
W4	I am forced to do work to meet deadlines	Work-Related	64.6
W3	I am requested to do work which is out of the job scope	Work-Related	60.3
W5	I am taken advantage of	Person-Related	52.7
W7	I am requested to do unnecessary work which is not relevant to the job description	Work-Related	50.9
W12	I am requested to do an excessive amount of work	Work-Related	49.8

TYPES OF COPING STRATEGIES USED

To further conduct statistical analysis and to classify the most or least preferred, the dichotomization used by Hawkins et al. (2021) was applied. From the analysis, the top five most and least preferred coping strategies can be categorized as shown in Table 7 and Table 8.

Table 7
Top 5 Most Used Coping Strategies

Item No	Item Description	Type of Coping Strategy	Problem Focused or Emotion Focused	Frequency /%
C25	I tell myself that this is only a job and that there are other things in life to deal with	Reframing	Emotion Focused	72.2
C23	I remind myself that there are more important matters in my life	Reframing	Emotion Focused	70
C3	I convince myself that I do my job well, so that the superior can't harm me.	Reframing	Emotion Focused	69.7
C24	I convince myself that this is a small, unimportant matter.	Reframing	Emotion Focused	65
C18	I behave in a friendly manner towards the superior so that he/she will stop acting like that	Ingratiation	Problem Focused ¹	52.3

¹C18 can be removed from the top 5 list as it represents only one type of strategy within ingratiation, and this indicates only partial usage of the strategy

Table 8*Top 5 Least Used Coping Strategies*

Item No	Item Description	Type of Coping Strategy	Problem Focused or Emotion Focused	Frequency /%
C5	I take every opportunity to be nice to the superior so that he/she will think I am a good friend	Direct Communication	Problem Focused	17.7
C20	I ask the superior politely to stop behaving like that	Direct Communication	Problem Focused	22.4
C11	I talk to the superior about the problems in our relationship so that he/she will stop acting that way	Direct Communication	Problem Focused	22.7
C21	I publicly express my belief in the superior in his/her presence so that he/she will feel that I'm on his/her side	Ingratiation	Problem Focused	23.8
C10	I tell the superior directly and clearly that he/she must not treat me like that	Direct Communication	Problem Focused	24.5

The analysis shows that Malaysian white-collar employees prefer to use emotion-focused coping strategies while dealing with toxic leaders. Most respondents prefer the reframing strategy. The least preferred coping strategy is from the problem focused category, mainly direct communication. Respondents also do not prefer to ingratiate their superiors by publicly expressing their belief in them to show that they are on their superior's side.

In sum, the majority of the respondents experience work-related instead of person-related toxic leadership behaviours. To handle these negative experiences, respondents prefer to use emotion focused coping strategies instead of problem focused. The majority of the respondents use reframing coping strategy to deal with toxic leaders.

CONCLUSION

The current research shows that white-collar employees mostly experience work-related toxic behaviours. Kwan et al. (2014) concurs; they explain that leaders engage in toxic behaviours to maintain hierarchy and order in the workplace, which is needed to promote business growth. Healthy competition in the workplace is important for growth, however when it solely makes being the best as its focus, competition turns toxic. The maddening speed at which businesses are growing breeds toxic culture in the workplace (Pei Ting, 2021). Performance and profits are prioritized. Leaders are trained to be narcissistic, creative, and intelligent in achieving company goals but not in people skills. Hence, they set goals that complements their own achievements, unreasonable deadlines, unmanageable workload, or delegate work that is otherwise not in their subordinate's job scope to exceed the expectations of their own superiors, causing employees to experience work-related toxic behaviours (Milosevic et al., 2020).

There are no specific laws in Malaysia to protect employees from toxic leadership behaviours, unlike sexual harassment which is legislated through the Employment Act 1955. Even though employees in Malaysia are not distinctively protected by the existing Malaysian labour laws for toxic leadership behaviours, employees who find that the mistreatment by his/her superior has breached the employment contract can bring forward a claim for constructive dismissal. This is already in place under the Industrial Relations Act 1967 (Act 177) (Mallow, 2014). Besides that, the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) has established the "Guidance for the Prevention of Stress and Violence at the Workplace" that describes actions that can be taken to reduce psychological violence and stress at the workplace.

The findings further reveal that majority of white-collar employees in Malaysia prefer using reframing when dealing with toxic leaders whereas direct communication is not preferred. The overall findings reveal that the respondents prefer emotion-focused instead of problem-focused coping strategies. What this means is that white-collar employees in Malaysia believe that their experiences are beyond their control as they use more emotion-focused coping strategies to regulate their emotions.

Van Bockstaele et al. (2020) and Haines et al. (2016) observed that reframing strategy will only be effective in situations that cannot be controlled. What this means is reframing can be an adaptive coping strategy when utilized in issues that are beyond the control of individuals. Yuzana and Martin (2017) conducted a study in which they interviewed twelve Malaysian employees to uncover why there are low reporting of inappropriate workplace behaviour incidents. They found that respondents felt the existence of power imbalance causes no action to be taken against perpetrators. Instead, the victims may have to face negative consequences that may affect their jobs or career advancement. Therefore, it can be generalized that Malaysian employees consider toxic behaviours to be beyond their control.

Vishkin et al. (2016) found a positive linkage between religious individuals and usage of reframing in three different religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. They further clarify that religion structures the emotional experiences of individuals extrinsically or intrinsically. An individual's emotion is regulated extrinsically with the existence of a social network that provides support and a sense of belonging. The intrinsic regulation of emotion can be linked to the usage of prayer or meditation to seek direction and peace of mind.

Lastly, the current research shows that direct communication is the least preferred coping strategy. This correlates to a study done by Moon and Sánchez-Rodríguez (2020) who found that Korean respondents accept uncivil treatment by superior in higher position more easily compared to Spanish respondents. These findings are connected by the high-power distance and collectivist culture in both Malaysia and Korea. According to Jelavić et al. (2021), national culture can influence the workplace culture as culture is viewed as the conveyor of people's behaviours and values. Hence, when toxic leaders who are in high position display toxic behaviours, employees accept these mistreatments and refrain from reacting negatively or aggressively, thus clarifying why direct communication is not preferred by respondents.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has contributed to the increase of knowledge on the preferred coping strategies among white-collar employees in Malaysia. Many researchers have revealed that the usage of emotion-focused strategies has been linked to emotional exhaustion (Bernstein & Trimm, 2016), which in turn can lead to mental health issues. As toxic leaders are capable and deliver excellent results, they cannot be easily replaced or removed from organizations. Therefore, organizations can help to mitigate the impact on employees by implementing mental health improvement programs, through which programs such as the allocation of a meditation room, post-work group exercise and 15 minutes breaks for stretching or getting health drinks can be done (Ratanasiripong et al., 2016). Also, organizations can set up support and counseling groups for employees to vent and find solutions for their problems at work and anxiety (Zyga et al., 2016).

Besides that, the findings from this research have practical implications particularly for Human Resource practitioners (HR). A systematic and thorough employee complaint management system should be established to enable resolving toxic behaviours in the workplace (De Cieri, 2019). Catley et al. (2017) found that trust is a crucial element in making complaint resolution successful. In their study they found that HR doubted employee's complaints and placed higher importance on their relationship with leaders.

An emotionally intelligent manager will be better equipped to handle challenging work requirements and avoid toxic behaviours (Kumar, 2022). Bradberry (2014) mentions that an employee who works calmly under pressure can deal with his/her emotions and perform better. He adds that such an employee can even neutralize the effects of a toxic leader. This is supported by the findings of May et al. (2014), who theorize that the way leaders and employees respond to toxic behaviours can determine if the vicious cycle is broken or perpetuated. A study done among nurses in Shiraz shows that when EI increases among respondents, their stress level reduces (Kheirkhah et al., 2018). Organizations can incorporate EI workshops into the annual training program to train employees handle complicated circumstances by attributing a different emotional value.

The changes in preference of coping strategies after prolonged exposure to toxic behaviours cannot be fully assessed in a cross-sectional study. For example, Doblhofer et al. (2019) found that effectiveness of reframing is time-bound. Over time with continued dependence on this strategy, employees may feel drained of their resources and therefore experience emotional exhaustion. Thus, employees may need to change the coping strategies used over time, changes cannot be captured in this research. Future researchers can explore the preferred coping strategies using a longitudinal study.

The research results may also be subjected to responder bias. There are two possible responder biases – unintentional and intentional (Glen, 2016). Unintentional bias occurs when the respondent has problems to recollect their experiences regarding the issues being addressed in the research while intentional bias occurs when the respondent is not comfortable to acknowledge the truth about the events in their workplace. In the case of current research, the issue is not socially acceptable and therefore respondents may tend to select coping strategies that are more appropriate, proactive, and compliant to work ethics. As such, qualitative research, that can probe deeper to generate clearer data that is genuine and better depicts actual emotional responses, could be used instead.

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