



ISSN: 2617-6548

URL: www.ijirss.com



The Shadow of Leadership: Examining the Prevalence of Toxic Leadership in Malaysia

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Abstract

Toxic leadership has emerged as a pervasive and destructive force across organizational landscapes globally, yet empirical, data-driven studies remain scarce—particularly within Southeast Asia. This study investigates the prevalence, perception, and emotional impact of toxic leadership in Malaysia through a quantitative survey of seventy-nine (79) respondents representing diverse industries. The findings reveal a troubling yet illuminating reality: 80% of participants reported firsthand experience with toxic leadership, and over half perceived such behaviors as intentional. Respondents overwhelmingly identified integrity, respect, and accountability as core attributes of effective leadership—traits perceived to be widely lacking among Malaysian leaders. Crucially, the study uncovers three culturally grounded insights: the erosion of trust between leaders and followers, the enabling role of conformity in high power distance environments, and the presence of entrenched cognitive biases that normalize and perpetuate toxicity. Drawing from leadership theory, behavioral science, and cultural psychology, the study establishes powerful links between leadership behavior, follower motivation, public perception, and organizational climate. In doing so, it offers evidence-informed strategies to address toxic leadership, with particular emphasis on fostering psychologically safe workplaces. While rooted in the Malaysian context, the findings bear significant implications for leadership reform in similarly structured societies across the globe.

Keywords: Leadership behavior, Malaysia, Quantitative research, Toxic Leadership.

DOI: 10.53894/ijirss.v8i3.6970

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

History: Received: 25 March 2025 / **Revised:** 29 April 2025 / **Accepted:** 2 May 2025 / **Published:** 13 May 2025

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Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Acknowledgements: We extend our sincere gratitude to Dr. Premkumar Rojagopal, President of MUST, Malaysia, for his invaluable support in facilitating the data collection process. His assistance was instrumental in the successful completion of this study.

Publisher: Innovative Research Publishing

1. Introduction

Toxic leadership continues to garner attention and interest on a global scale for good reason. According to a recent study, up to 56% of responding employees believe the CEO they currently work for is a toxic leader [1]. This number is staggering, despite not accounting for employees who have previously left toxic work environments in pursuit of healthier leadership. Furthermore, toxic leadership is directly correlated with low employee morale, job dissatisfaction, and reduced organizational effectiveness [2]. *These severe individual and organizational consequences create cycles of negative and harmful behavior that could last in perpetuity if left unaddressed.*

Despite the mounting number of highly public and devastating examples of toxic leadership, the vast amount of existing literature and content surrounding leadership, and more specifically toxic leadership, exists in anecdotal opinions and even impulsive social media posts [3-6]. While such content can range from extremely well-intentioned to very understandable venting of frustration, there remains a void in achieving practical and actionable research-based solutions that address the global phenomenon of toxic leadership. Therefore, it is imperative for leadership researchers and scholars to engage in a more nuanced exploration of the behaviors that underpin both constructive and toxic leadership—an endeavor that this paper seeks to undertake.

Effective solutions require more than surface-level fixes—they begin with a deep, culturally attuned understanding. This study aims to quantify the emotional and organizational impact of both positive and toxic leadership by examining the beliefs, perceptions, and emotional responses of those directly affected. At its core, the research seeks to illuminate the pervasive and often normalized presence of toxic leadership, particularly within hierarchical, collectivist cultures where harmful behaviors may be misinterpreted as strength or discipline. Centering on Malaysia as a representative high power distance society, the study employs a rigorous quantitative methodology to explore how leadership behavior shapes motivation, trust, perception, and organizational climate. The paper begins with a targeted review of leadership theory and cultural context, followed by a clear rationale for the study's design. Through comprehensive data analysis and critical interpretation, the findings uncover three core dynamics that sustain and conceal toxic leadership simultaneously - eroded trust, cultural conformity, and embedded cognitive biases. These insights inform a set of practical, evidence-based recommendations aimed at reshaping leadership practice through the cultivation of psychological safety and cultural reform. The paper concludes by urging continued research into longitudinal change strategies and deeper cross-cultural investigations to combat this global, systemic issue.

2. Background

Leadership has been defined in various ways long before it gained mainstream interest and popularity. A hundred and eighty years ago, Thomas Carlyle published his work on the great man theory, which suggested that some men are born with superior leadership qualities and are destined to determine history [7]. Leadership continues to be the center of debate. Another scholar argued that society, a myriad of social factors, and acquired skills are the actual determinants of leadership qualities [8]. While the great man theory remained influential in leadership studies through the early 20th century Lewin et al. [9] made a breakthrough in identifying the first group of distinct leadership styles, bringing leadership studies concretely into the social sciences, primarily through psychology and, to some degree, sociology. This indicates that leadership scholars and practitioners must undertake a rigorous, scientific approach to inquiry to truly understand the complex nature of leadership, its strengths, and dysfunctions.

In efforts to ground the scientific inquiry into positive versus toxic leadership, it is essential to outline the current scholarly understanding of leadership and how it informed the definition of toxic leadership used in this study, especially given the significant evolution of leadership theory since the seminal work of Lewin et al. [9]. From the most comprehensive definition of leadership that provides a robust understanding of the nature of relationships and bonds between leaders and followers [10] to those that delineate between traits and characteristics among various leadership styles [11] and even more succinct practitioner-focused definitions that identify deeply personal attributes and practices [12] - a commonly shared attribute of all currently accepted leadership definitions is that they are action-oriented. Therefore, the definition of leadership underpinning this study is: "An intentional means by which a leader influences a group of people in an organization to a widely understood future state that is different from the present one" [13]. This definition extends beyond encapsulating the core of other widely accepted interpretations. Its strong emphasis on action, particularly influence, highlights it as the driving force behind the diverse leadership behaviors that shape an organization's present state to future vision.

From a practical point of view, while action is critical in the achievement of organizational goals, a major limitation of nearly every general definition of leadership and subsequent leadership styles is that the emphasis in application is largely focused on positives that can be produced, such as motivation, collaboration, encouragement, and inspiration [14]. While this optimistic approach makes perfect sense on a human level, this paper seeks to undertake a more holistic and realistic approach to understanding leadership and to address even the most undesirable of realities. An estimated one in three leaders globally has the potential to cultivate a toxic organizational culture, frequently resulting in deep dysfunction within follower-leader relationships [1, 15]. Therefore, it is essential to examine toxic leadership, its root causes, and how it contrasts with healthy leadership to help shape a more positive leadership future. To support this effort, the study presents a definition of toxic leadership as the foundation for its research methodology.

Toxic leadership is the intentional or unintentional series of acts that undermine and discourage those followers who genuinely seek to carry out the mission and vision of the organization, who then become stifled in the process of

achievement by self-serving leaders who put missional or personal gain above the needs of followers, creating a demoralized state that deteriorates organizations from the inside out [16].

This definition confronts the harsh realities of toxic leadership—difficult but necessary for equipping scholars and practitioners with the tools to recognize, address, and prevent its damaging effects [16].

3. Methodology

The definitional review in the background section builds upon a substantial body of prior research that has examined and progressively expanded our understanding of leadership, particularly focusing on toxic leadership [5, 13, 16, 17]. This review reveals a critical theme: while leadership is inherently action-oriented, a leader's motive and intent—especially positive—cannot be presumed, given the sharp contrast between the uplifting nature of healthy leadership and the intentional harm often seen in toxic leadership [14, 16]. There remains a gap where beliefs, feelings, motivation, perceptions, and intentions intertwine to shape an often overlooked and multi-dimensional force capable of influencing the cultural trajectory of an organization, as well as the physical and emotional vitality of those who occupy it along an extremely dichotomous spectrum of positive and toxic leadership. Therefore, this study sought to delve into this force to better understand followers' beliefs and perceptions related to both positive and toxic leadership, with the primary objective of identifying patterns that could lead to actionable recommendations for new and/or modified leadership behaviors that consistently steer leaders away from toxicity and towards health.

Findings from the Edelman [18] Trust Barometer support that leadership in action is not always positive; on a global level, followers believe both business and government leaders intentionally mislead them at rates of 68% and 69%, respectively [18]. This demonstrates that at least one of the core tenets of toxic leadership unfortunately has a global footprint. Despite the global nature of the toxic leadership epidemic, the Southeast Asian country of Malaysia was the geographic focus for this study. Limiting the study to a specific country allowed for a deeper focus on the cultural, environmental, and sociological factors that drive perceptions and beliefs about leadership and toxic leadership, while simultaneously removing additional variables that are inevitably added once the geography of a study is expanded [19]. Despite the confined nature in terms of the geography of the study, the sample of participants was diverse, alleviating potential concerns that geographic scope was a limitation. In summary, this study had a clearly defined geographic footprint and sample population.

The research team chose to conduct a quantitative study via electronic survey. Quantitative studies are primarily directed at identifying patterns and other relationships that exist within and between the different data, as well as pinpointing trends [20]. It is of paramount importance to execute these accurately while remaining objective [21]. The research team recognized that raw numerical data offered the most effective means to critically and objectively assess a topic often clouded by subjectivity and emotional bias. A potential limitation of this approach was that quantitative research studies can simply fail to capture the human emotion and experience of what is being studied [21, 22] particularly when the subject is as deeply personal and emotionally charged as toxic leadership. The team is confident that this variable was effectively mitigated through a deliberately crafted question design, anchored in the clarity and intent of the research questions themselves:

1. What do followers believe the behaviors of positive leadership are, and do these drive motivation in a distinctly divergent way from toxic leadership?
2. What do followers feel are the most frustrating leadership behaviors, and do they perceive the intent as toxic?
3. What are followers' perceptions of leaders, and does healthy or toxic behavior influence their own perception of work?
4. From the followers' perspective, are leaders' motivation and prioritization driven by toxic behaviors, and what is the impact on followers?
5. Have followers experienced toxic leadership, and how did it make them feel?

Identifying specific emotional states in affective sciences remains challenging in many cases, especially when the aim is to understand physiological or cognitive impacts [23]. However, simple yet well-constructed surveys using Likert scales and multiple-choice questions have been shown to provide significant understanding of study participants' beliefs, feelings, and perceptions [24, 25]. Therefore, this approach was adopted with select questions that allowed participants to indicate multiple responses within the same question when they were asked to identify specific feelings or beliefs. The research framework and design of the survey, based on a stated set of emotion-based research questions, allowed the team to target beliefs, feelings, motivation, perceptions, and intentions relative to both positive and toxic leadership. The study contained seven (7) overarching questions, with four (4) containing sub-questions. A total of twelve (12) survey questions were administered to a sample population of seventy-nine (79) participants.

4. Results and Discussion

Despite the limited number of survey questions, the seventy-nine (79) respondents provided a wealth of data and deep insights that significantly advanced both the overarching research objective and the specific research questions. This section presents the survey results in the order the questions were administered, followed by in-depth interpretations and a critical discussion of their significance.

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked to identify behaviors and/or traits they believe exemplify positive leadership. It is important to note that traits in the context of this study are understood by their psychological definition, which are patterns of behavior that are consistent and habitual, not to be confused with characteristics [26]. Thus, all survey questions relating to leadership behaviors and traits will be referred to as behaviors for the remainder of the results and discussion. Respondents selected up to five (5) behaviors from a list of twenty-three (23), highlighting those they believed

best exemplified effective leadership. They were also allowed to select “other” behaviors not identified from the preset list. While every option had at least one (1) selection, the five (5) behaviors exemplifying positive leadership chosen most were accountable – 73%, integrity – 48%, visionary – 47%, empowering – 43%, and respectful – 42%. Each of these behaviors can be connected to the integral element of influence as used in this study’s definition of leadership and are also connected to the successful application of numerous leadership styles that are considered desirable [5, 13]. From this initial question, two important sub-questions served as follow-ups. The first assessed relative personal follower motivation, i.e., if leaders demonstrated one or more of the behaviors of positive leadership, would it influence their own motivation at work? This assessment used a standard Likert scale ranging from completely unmotivated to highly motivated. 58% of followers stated they would be highly motivated if leaders demonstrated one or more of the behaviors of positive leadership; 30% said this would be somewhat motivating. Thus, 88% of survey respondents indicated that their chosen behaviors that exemplify positive leadership would positively influence their personal motivation at work. This data reinforces the critical role of positive follower motivation in widely accepted leadership styles [14].

Conversely, only 12% of respondents noted that positive leadership behaviors would not influence their motivation at work. The second follow-up provided further examination by seeking to understand whether behaviors respondents believe exemplify positive leadership are lacking specifically in Malaysian leaders. A simple three (3) option multiple-choice question was utilized. 73% of respondents indicated yes, the identified behaviors of positive leadership are lacking in Malaysian leaders. 8% stated these behaviors are not lacking while the remaining 19% were unsure if these behaviors were lacking. This number is striking but aligns culturally in several ways. Malaysia’s culturally rich work setting comprises approximately 65% of indigenous Malay Bumiputeras, as well as the Chinese and Malay [27, 28]. According to Selvarajah and Meyer [28], “clearly defined human relation principles are essential in a plural society.” Therefore, delving into the influence of Malaysia’s three main ethnicities (the Malay, Chinese, and Indians) core values could offer valuable insights on the perceived importance of the positive leadership qualities mentioned above. First, core values like trust, loyalty, emotional interdependence, collective well-being, social sensitivity, and a strong sense of honor underpin interpersonal relationships within the Malay community [29]. This underscores the need for leaders who embody accountability, integrity, and respect. On the other hand, the Chinese community is traditionally rooted in Confucian, Mencius, and Taoist values; of which the latter suggested that good leaders are those capable of providing opportunities for growth instead of imposing obligations, which echoes the findings of this study whereby “empowering” and “visionary” behaviors are best regarded as positive leadership qualities [28, 30]. The findings also reflect Confucian values of being creative and risk-taking - visionary, relating and communicating accountable, articulating vision - visionary/empowering, showing benevolence - respectful, monitoring operations - accountable, and being authoritative – accountable [31]. In a similar vein, the findings of this study are coherent with the Indian community’s perception that effective leadership should embody a nurturing, supportive, and collective orientation in favor of the people and the long-term goals [32]. Correspondingly, the nation’s high collectivism score (73 on Hofstede’s comparative index) [33] reflects the heavy emphasis Malaysian employees place on collective well-being, strong humane orientation, as well as hierarchical differences [34] - thus, suggesting that empowering employees at the workplace is conducive to motivating employees [11].

The key finding is that positive leadership behaviors boost Malaysian followers' motivation yet are widely seen as lacking in their leaders. This offers a significant opportunity for leader behavioral improvement and/or modification. High collectivism among Malaysians underpins Malaysian employees’ cultural propensity to oblige towards their superiors in exchange for patronage [35]. This further explains our findings, where positive leadership fuels the personal motivation of employees at work while avoiding assertive or confrontational behavior towards leaders [34]. As Malaysia has one of the highest power distance levels in the world, [36] scoring one hundred (100) on Hofstede’s power distance comparative index, [33] a potential explanation for findings that approximately 73% of respondents suggest that Malaysian leaders lack positive leadership behaviors could be attributed to national culture. This is because high power distance clouds the effectiveness of communication between leaders and their subordinates while suppressing employees’ tendencies to defy their superiors [35].

Next, the survey required respondents to identify leadership behaviors they observe in Malaysian workplaces or socially that they believe discourage or frustrate employees in an attempt to assess their lived experience. Respondents were given a list of twenty-one (21) behaviors to choose from. As with the previous multiple-response question, respondents were instructed to make up to five (5) selections and were given the option of “other.” Every option had at least one response. The five (5) behaviors chosen most were inconsistent – 63%, poor communication – 56%, controlling – 48%, discouraging – 44%, and toxic – 46%. Each of these selections directly correlates to this study’s definition of toxic leadership [16]. The research team then went further by assessing intentionality. In this instance, respondents used a Likert scale ranging from completely unintentional to completely intentional to answer to what extent they believe these discouraging behaviors were intentional. Thirteen percent (13%) believe these leader behaviors are completely intentional, and forty percent (40%) believe they are somewhat intentional. More than half of respondents (53%) believe there is intentionality behind leader behaviors that frustrate or discourage employees. Meanwhile, thirty-seven percent (37%) believe these behaviors are equally intentional and unintentional. This number is significant as respondents signaled their belief that the occurrence of intent is just as often as no intent. Practically, this escalates the percentage of poor intent higher than 53%. However, this study does not claim a specific percentage beyond 53%, as this would be impossible to validate under the current survey design. Finally, six percent (6%) believe the behaviors are mostly unintentional, and only four percent (4%) believe they are completely unintentional. While it is remarkable that over half of respondents believe that leaders behave with intent that frustrates and discourages followers, the fact that merely four percent (4%) of respondents believe that these behaviors are completely unintentional is significant, as intent refers to premeditated thought and a particular degree of planning

related to a specific desired outcome [37]. Thus, this data shows that most Malaysian followers believe there is a calculated effort on the part of leaders to behave in ways that actively discourage and frustrate them. While the exact psychological toll on followers and its ripple effect on organizational culture may be difficult to quantify, the consequences are undoubtedly profound and potentially devastating. To explain this phenomenon, this study draws upon *paternalism*, conceptualized as a form of “legitimate authority” [38] which plays a pivotal role in shaping leadership in East Asian regions where Confucianism and collectivism are practiced Tang et al. [39]. Lau et al. [40] suggests that paternalistic leadership houses two broad behavioral types in leaders shaped by Chinese capitalism, namely: “shi-en” (focuses on granting favors) or “li-wei” (instilling awe or fear). The latter of the two behavioral types probably explains respondents’ beliefs that leaders intentionally behave in certain ways to instill awe. Moreover, the Malaysian culture is a very respectful, nuanced complex of classes which upholds the authority of those at the top of organizations [36]; further reasserting the dominance of high-power distance culture and widely practiced authoritative leadership that favors conformity, order, and absolute obedience [28, 39]. To further explain the influence of paternalism in leadership, Farh and Cheng [41] suggested that it encompasses the dimensions of authoritarianism, which oversees the exertion of strong authority and control in efforts to rigorously push subordinates towards meeting performance benchmarks, alongside values of benevolence and morality that incline towards the display of granting favors. However, authoritarianism is seen as a display of distrust towards subordinates’ capabilities and performance and thus, conversely influences subordinates’ levels of trust [42]. This serves as a reminder of the crucial importance of acknowledging individual needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness in motivating employees, further supporting the findings of this study on what constitutes positive leadership, as well as its impact on personal motivation among Malaysian employees [43].

Advancing a comprehensive perspective, the survey challenged respondents to identify the three (3) most dominant public perceptions of leadership behavior from an extensive list of forty (40), offering deeper insight into societal views on leadership. The top five (5) choices by percentage were: inconsistent – 37%, controlling – 28%, authoritative – 27%, poor communicators – 22%, toxic and weak – 19% each, and finally, abusive, ambitious, and discouraging – 18% each respectively. Inconsistency, control, poor communication, and toxicity were congruent with the top responses in question 2, thus establishing the first connection between personal experience with negative leadership behavior and their perception of others’ beliefs relative to leadership behavior in general. Furthermore, discouragement received the sixth (6th) most responses when assessing discouraging and frustrating behaviors, further reinforcing the correlation between experience and perception. This implies that the false consensus effect has taken hold within Malaysian culture, whereby over time, people’s experiences drive them toward a particular set of beliefs, and they begin to assume that their beliefs are typical of others as well [44].

The survey next examined how respondents perceive the leadership behaviors identified in question 3 as shaping or influencing others’ perceptions of the broader work environment. Though also focused on perceptions of work, this question differs strategically by examining respondents’ views on how leadership behavior influences others’ motivation, measured using a Likert scale from no influence (0%) to complete influence (100%). The corresponding results were total influence – 18%, significant influence – 47%, some influence – 23%, low influence – 10%, and no influence – 2%. While 65% of respondents believe the perception of leaders dictates others’ perceptions of work, the critical takeaway is that 98% of respondents believe others’ perceptions of work are at least partly influenced by the public perception of leaders’ behavior. This presents a positive correlation with followers’ perceptions of work, where 88% of respondents stated that positive leadership behaviors would impact their own work motivation. Thus, this makes further sense of the strong predictive ability of negatively perceived leadership behavior on perceived influence on others’ motivation. This also demonstrates that the phenomenon of social projection affects followers in Malaysia. Social projection oversees individuals literally projecting their own unique situational motivations, beliefs, perceptions, and values onto others, creating a self-belief that others will respond and/or feel the same way they do in a particular social situation [45]. Along with the false consensus effect, the results of this study are important as they quantitatively demonstrate how both good and toxic leadership behaviors can amplify beliefs about leadership in both perception and reality. In turn, this can have a profound impact on organizational achievement, culture, and leader effectiveness. Findings that leadership behavior would predict work motivation are rooted in the Self-Determination Theory perspective, which asserts that the balance between contextual factors, individuals’ behavior, and affect are dependent on the satisfaction of human psychological needs [46] in which individuals need to feel, express, and practice their capacities - *need for competence*, feelings of being cared for alongside building connections - *need for relatedness*, as well as being able to act based on their own choices - *need for autonomy* [47]. The ‘budi’ concept rooted in values of civility, kindness, care, generosity, consideration, and respect further reinforces the expectations that Malaysian employees have for their leaders [48]. Inherently, these needs are congruent with behavior that embodies positive leadership and are representative of toxic behaviors identified in the findings of this study. The distrust exhibited by leaders underlies the negative leadership behaviors highlighted in this part of the survey. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that genuine trust is built on mutual respect, not on manipulation or the exploitation of power imbalances [39].

The survey further explored follower beliefs regarding the primary motivations of leaders. Participants were presented with a list of eight potential motivations—ranging from inherently selfish to purely selfless—each corresponding to a recognized leadership style, such as transactional, transformational, servant leadership, and others [13]. Respondents were asked to provide one (1) response, as the primary motivation was the key driver of this question. The top three (3) beliefs about the primary motivation of leaders in Malaysia were making money for themselves – 40%, gaining influence over others – 20%, and driving organizational goals – 18%. Regarding motivation relative to followers, 2% of respondents believed that the primary motivation of leaders is to help employees. These results signal widespread toxic leadership in Malaysia, literally

by definition, where leaders are self-serving and place their personal desires for money or influence (60%) or the needs of the organization (18%) far above the needs of followers [16].

The succeeding question regarding primary leader motivation was also an assessment of the perceived impact on followers' motivation at work. However, this time, the impetus for understanding follower motivation was leader motivation, as opposed to leader behaviors. This allowed the study to further explore the potential variety of influences on follower motivation. Using a three (3) option multiple-choice question on the influence of leader motivation on employee motivation at work, results yielded 56% (significant influence), 33% (some influence), and 11% (no influence) respectively. This data is significant as 89% of followers believe leader motivation is directly tied to other followers' motivation. The overarching correlation between leader behaviors, perceptions, and motivation with followers' motivation must be highlighted as one of the critical findings of this study. It is widely recognized that positively motivated employees perform at higher levels and experience greater job satisfaction—factors that directly enhance overall organizational effectiveness [49]. Further, this type of positive follower motivation is paramount to the success of leadership styles that are classically accepted as good, such as transformational leadership [14, 49]. When considering this phenomenon, we draw upon the organismic integration theory, which suggests that individual motivation runs on a no-self-determination-to-self-determination continuum that is influenced by the external environment [50]. From a cultural perspective, Malaysians largely value collective well-being [51]. Therefore, positive leadership is favored and has the potential to elevate performance and other areas of organizational effectiveness as opposed to pernicious traits such as abusive communication, micromanaging tendencies, lack of empathy, intemperate behavior, as well as self-promoting behavior - which deters team morale [52].

Next, the survey moved from understanding leader motivation to leader priorities. Respondents were presented with three (3) possible high-level leader priorities and were asked to rank how they believe leaders themselves view each priority relative to the other two (2). The possible leader priorities were the leader (themselves), the organization (the mission), and the followers (others besides the leader and organization). Respondents' rankings on their beliefs about how leaders view each of the priorities in relationship to one another are tabulated in Table 1. For example, when ranking the leader as a leader priority, 49% of respondents believe leaders themselves are their own top priority, 28% believe leaders prioritize themselves second, and 23% believe leaders prioritize themselves last relative to the organization and the followers.

Table 1.
Followers' Belief of Leader Priorities.

Possible Leader Priorities	Ranking of Each Priority Relative to the Other Two		
	First Priority	Second Priority	Last Priority
The Leader	49%	28%	23%
The Organization	41%	43%	16%
The Followers	11%	29%	60%

This data indicates that followers believe leaders prioritize themselves over followers. At best, followers think there is a strong combination of leaders' priorities in themselves and the organization. Nevertheless, even in this "best-case" scenario, the followers believe they are always the distant last priority of leaders. Again, this data points to the prevalence of toxic leadership in Malaysian organizational settings [16]. The connection between leader priorities and toxic leadership is of paramount importance. This is because priorities and values are almost inextricably intertwined, as values are a guiding set of beliefs that usually drive one's behavior [53]. Toxic leadership could very well be permeating Malaysian leaders' value systems, which can be extremely difficult to root out without a clear and strategic plan of action. Leaders' tendencies to prioritize themselves over followers are often associated with narcissism - otherwise understood as a self-centered trait prevalent in those with authoritative positions [54]. When leaders exhibit self-promoting behavior or trumpet their personal achievements over others' contributions, it often results in adverse effects such as diminishing motivation among employees as well as resentment towards the leader [52]. The display of narcissistic tendencies is further segregated into two categories: the first known as narcissistic rivalry, which aims at defending superiority against perceived rivals, whereas narcissistic admiration stems from the drive to pursue one's perceived uniqueness [55]. These devaluing thoughts from either category breed hostile and socially insensitive behavior, which further contributes to resentment and rejection [56]. In a collectivist society marked by paternalistic and authoritarian traits [57], the disconnect between leaders' priorities and the interests of their subordinates is unsurprising and deeply rooted in the prevailing cultural norms.

The penultimate question in the survey presented respondents with the definition of toxic leadership utilized in this study and asked them to state whether they have experienced toxic leadership based on the given definition. Eighty percent indicated they have personally experienced toxic leadership based on the definition used in this study, fourteen percent indicated they had not experienced toxic leadership, and six percent stated that they could not identify whether they had experienced toxic leadership based on the definition. This study recognizes the limitation that these findings may have been influenced by respondents' potential confusion over the provided definition or by language barriers related to English proficiency. However, the former seems unlikely since ninety-four percent of respondents were able to provide a definitive answer. The finding that four (4) out of five (5) respondents have experienced toxic leadership in Malaysia is a powerful indicator of its widespread prevalence. While the reality is concerning, toxic leadership is far from being a uniquely Malaysian issue—it is a widespread, global phenomenon. Various toxic leadership behaviors, including the highly dangerous Dark Triad traits, are prevalent globally and are not limited to any specific industries [58].

To conclude the survey and deepen understanding of the gap between healthy and toxic leadership, respondents were asked a final question about how toxic leadership made them feel, if they had experienced it. In this context, feelings are

incredibly important. While they do not scientifically validate beliefs and perceptions, they reinforce them, thus aligning people's feelings to what they believe to be true [59]. The top five (5) feelings toxic leadership elicited from respondents were frustration – 65%, stress – 53%, lack of motivation – 52%, depression – 41%, and anger – 39%. Each of these feelings facilitates decreased organizational effectiveness and can have severe mental health consequences for followers. This study demonstrated how the existence and subsequent persistence of toxic leadership can perpetuate and amplify an existing issue to the point of creating perceptions and beliefs among followers that spread uncontrollably to organizations of all industries and sizes. The works of Lian et al. [60] highlighted that subordinates of high-power distance orientation would view their leaders as role models and model their own deviant behaviors after their toxic role models; therefore, exacerbating the chronic issue of toxic leadership and its impact on engagement [61, 62]. It is reiterated that communities that strongly value group loyalty (high collectivism) and uphold salient differences in authority (high power distance) often oversee the emergence of toxic leaders as they impose their causes and assumptions into the community in which they belong [63]. The resulting adverse effects on stress and well-being [64] highlight a dire need for stronger awareness on the topic of toxic leadership and how it can be curbed as a means of promoting a healthier workplace.

A brief overview of the survey demographics helps illustrate the sample's diversity and address potential limitations. Capturing data on age, sector, industry, and organization size provides valuable context and reinforces the credibility of the study's findings and recommendations [65]. The median age range of survey respondents was 45-54, which appeared to be a slight limitation initially. However, the approximate mean age of respondents was 45.1 years, or at the lowest end of the median range. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia [66], age 15-64 comprises the working age population of Malaysia, with a clear distinction between youth workers (age 15-24) and adult workers (age 25-64). Thus, the mean age of survey respondents fits squarely in the middle of the adult working age in Malaysia, indicating a very strong age sampling for this survey. For-profit, nonprofit, government, students, and the unemployed/transitional were all represented in this survey. While basic available employment data would suggest that the majority of Malaysian workers are employed in the for-profit sector, it is extremely difficult to decipher if the 77.2% of respondents to this survey employed in the for-profit sector is an accurate representation of the Malaysian workforce. Thus, it is possible that industry representation could be a slight limitation. Industry diversity was robust, as respondents represented twenty-four (24) different industries. However, 38% of respondents were from education, presenting a slight limitation. Finally, the median organization size was 250-500 employees. In contrasting fashion, the mean organization size was approximately 4,748 employees. This is not a limitation, as 11.4% of respondents work in organizations of 25,000 or more employees, which skewed the mean away from the median. Nevertheless, organizations of less than 250 people through 25,000 plus were well represented in this survey. Overall, the demographic data confirmed a diverse group of respondents, validating an accurate sampling of the Malaysian population, allowing the research team to move forward with culturally accurate recommendations [65].

4.1. Consequences of Toxic Leadership

With an understanding of the findings of this research study, the most important question at this juncture becomes, "What are the consequences of toxic leadership?" In reality, there are five (5) known categories of consequences, namely: individual, group/team, organizational, behavioral, as well as moral and ethical [67-71]. Each category has its own extensive set of first and second-order consequences. While a detailed discussion of each category of toxic leadership consequences is beyond the scope of this paper, the survey data from this study validates three (3) specific consequences from the larger categories: (1) harmful communication style, (2) abuse of power, and, of course, (3) negative organizational impact.

The lived experience of observed leadership behaviors in Malaysia of poor communication (56%), controlling (48%), discouraging (44%), and toxic (46%) clearly points to both harmful communication and abuse of power. These statistics, coupled with the fact that 53% of survey respondents believed there was at least some intentionality behind these behaviors, reflect a distinct level of follower awareness that toxic leadership actively exists through multiple varieties of follower abuse, whether leaders themselves are aware or not. Further, as noted in the results and discussion, the observed leader behaviors directly correlated with public perception of leaders in Malaysia, bringing perception and reality into obvious alignment. This phenomenon is extremely powerful for better or worse. It was also clearly demonstrated that these experiences and perceptions impacted both the perception of work and work motivation. Findings where 65% of respondents believe public perception of leaders influences others' perception of work itself, combined with 88% of survey respondents reporting that positive leadership behaviors directly influenced their own motivation, underscore the powerful impact of leader behavior on key organizational outcomes such as employee morale, job satisfaction, and productivity. When follower perceptions and experiences diverge from what motivates them positively, the organization inevitably bears the cost. While these consequences highlight the significant costs of toxic leadership in Malaysian organizations, it is equally important to examine the root dynamics that sustain and amplify these issues.

4.2. Critical Insights and Takeaways

In addition to the overarching consequences of toxic leadership briefly presented, it becomes essential to examine the deeper dynamics at play, particularly the underlying insights that emerged from this study. The findings of this research study produced three (3) critical insights beneficial for scholars and practitioners alike.

4.3. Toxic Behavior Has Eroded Trust

Followers' perception of intentionally toxic behavior on the part of leaders—53% of survey respondents believe leader behavior is intentionally toxic, while only 4% believe the behavior is completely unintentional—signals a potential cultural crisis regarding followers' trust in Malaysian leaders. A recent study found that authentic leadership and the affective

commitment of followers are directly correlated [17]. These findings affirm that leaders play a vital role in creating and fostering trust in organizational settings [17]. Unfortunately, the data from this study demonstrate that the inverse is the current reality in Malaysia. This signifies that without meaningful and intentional efforts on the part of organizational leaders, trust will continue to erode, eventually crippling organizational capabilities. Building on this, another study measuring perceived leader integrity, moral behavior, and behavioral consistency unsurprisingly found that leader behavior that is both moral and consistent positively influences affective and cognitive trust in leaders among followers [72]. Therefore, if the perception of Malaysian leaders continues to be one of intentional toxicity, it will be nearly impossible to rebuild trust in organizational settings, particularly given the extremely high power distance that presently exists [36]. This systemic breakdown in trust may inhibit psychological safety, suppress innovation, and entrench organizational dysfunction.

4.4. Cultural Conformity is Enabling Continued Toxicity

The results of this study clearly demonstrate a high awareness among followers regarding the presence of toxic leadership in Malaysian organizations from the most observed leader behaviors—inconsistent (63%), poor communication (56%), controlling (48%), discouraging (44%), and toxic (46%). Compounding this is the fact that 80% of respondents have personally experienced toxic leadership. Further, 88% of respondents noted that positive leadership behaviors would—future tense—reinforce the earlier finding that toxic leadership behaviors currently dominate the Malaysian organizational landscape. In high power distance cultures like Malaysia, there is a general deference to authority, and it is rarely questioned [73]. Unfortunately, this means that existing cultural norms will only enable the continuance of toxic leadership where it exists. Going further—one classic study illustrated how followers refrain from providing input despite noticing harmful behavior in collectivist societies like Malaysia, where conformity is the by-product of collectivism; thus allowing toxic leadership to perpetuate largely unchallenged [74]. The paternalistic nature of Malaysian culture could also be enabling toxic leadership, as there is often a fear of reprisal when speaking up in contradiction to authority [75]. This suggests that reform efforts must address not only behavior but also the cultural norms that protect such behavior.

4.5. Toxic Leadership Has Embedded Cognitive Biases

98% of survey respondents believe that others' perceptions of work are influenced by public perceptions of leaders, and this strongly correlates with their own motivation levels. This data point illuminates several interconnected concerns. Toxic leadership in Malaysia is currently impacting follower motivation from virtually every possible angle—Organizational Climate Theory—where collective perceptions among followers have influenced their behavior, attitudes, and personal motivation [76]. From both scientific and practical perspectives, this means that social projection and false consensus—important yet detrimental cognitive biases in this instance—have taken root among followers in Malaysian organizations, whereby followers are assuming their peers think and feel the same as they do; and also likely overestimating how common their own beliefs are among others [44, 77]. Cognitive patterns of followers such as these can create perpetual cycles of collective thinking that will only further fracture the existing levels of mistrust between leaders and followers in Malaysia. Furthermore, this presents a real future-oriented danger where the mere perceptions of toxic leadership become a self-fulfilling prophecy in Malaysian organizations—Pygmalion Effect—where expectation alignment and behavioral convergence will realize collective perceptions over time [78]. If Malaysian organizations were to reach this state of critical mass, the consequences would likely create a state far more dire than the current one. This collective cognitive distortion may also reduce the perceived utility of change efforts, as followers assume the organizational climate is too deeply entrenched to shift meaningfully.

While the findings paint a challenging reality in Malaysian organizations—marked by trust erosion, cultural silence, and embedded bias—they also offer a clear path forward. Rebuilding trust between leaders and followers can reshape perceptions, dismantle harmful cognitive patterns over time, and ultimately restore organizational health. The work ahead is significant—but is possible, and it begins with the awareness provided through this research study.

4.6. Concluding Remarks and Future Perspectives

This study has illuminated a sobering truth: toxic leadership is not an anomaly within Malaysian organizations, but a culturally embedded and psychologically reinforced phenomenon with systemic consequences. With 80% of respondents reporting personal experience with toxic leadership and 98% affirming its influence on workplace perception and motivation, the data expose a deeply rooted leadership crisis. It is not merely the presence of toxic behaviors that is alarming, but the normalization of these behaviors within cultural frameworks that prize hierarchy, deference, and conformity.

Critically, this research underscores that toxic leadership is sustained by more than flawed individuals; it is reinforced by organizational cultures shaped by high power distance, cultural silence, and cognitive biases such as false consensus and social projection. In such settings, harmful behaviors are tolerated, rationalized, and followers' trust erodes as they internalize the dysfunction. These dynamics collectively suppress innovation, psychological safety, and the potential for authentic leadership to thrive.

The path forward requires more than procedural fixes or surface-level reforms. This study calls for a culturally sensitive transformation rooted in the deliberate cultivation of psychological safety—a climate where individuals can speak truth to power, challenge dysfunction, and contribute fully without fear of reprisal. Aligning leadership behavior with follower values such as integrity, empowerment, and respect is not just desirable; it is essential for restoring trust, improving motivation, and reclaiming organizational effectiveness.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of psychological safety initiatives and incorporate qualitative narratives to capture the emotional toll of toxic leadership. Comparative studies across Southeast Asia can further reveal how

cultural factors uniquely shape leadership behaviors and follower perceptions. Ultimately, sustainable leadership transformation demands more than theoretical commitment—it requires intentional, actionable change that is rooted in cultural awareness, built on mutual trust, and guided by integrity. Only through such deliberate and values-driven practice can organizations begin to dismantle toxicity and foster resilient, human-centered leadership cultures.

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