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Emerging From the Shadows: Follower Experience, Psychological Harm, and the Desire for Change Under Toxic Leadership in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the lived experiences of followers under toxic leadership in Malaysia, extending prior research that established its prevalence and systemic entrenchment. Drawing on a quantitative dataset (n=79) across 24 industries, the analysis shifts focus from documenting occurrence to examining the psychological, motivational, and behavioral consequences of toxic leadership. Findings reveal that more than 80% of respondents experienced significant negative impacts, with over half reporting that harm extended into both work and personal life. Followers overwhelmingly attributed toxic leadership to self-interest and deliberate intent, thereby eroding psychological safety and intensifying distrust. Coping responses were marked by avoidance, silence, emotional withdrawal, and resignation, reflecting not apathy but fear of retaliation and futility of organizational oversight. Paradoxically, beneath this normalization of toxicity lies a fragile but widespread desire for change: 84.8% of respondents expressed openness to reform, with a majority strongly endorsing systemic efforts to prevent and address toxic leadership. By integrating organizational behavior, cultural, and psychological frameworks, this study highlights two enduring insights: toxic leadership produces whole-life harm rooted in perceptions of leader self-interest, and cycles of silence and institutional failure perpetuate toxicity, even as followers retain hope for transformation. These findings underscore the destructive endurance of toxic leadership in Malaysia and the latent collective readiness for change, offering critical implications for leadership scholars and practitioners.

Keywords: Toxic Leadership, Follower Response, Psychological Harm, Quantitative Analysis, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary leadership discourse increasingly acknowledges that models which appear robust in theory often falter in practice. While there are many theoretical rationalizations for this, toxic leadership is now empirically validated as a major—and perhaps the most destructive—contributor to the erosion of organizational performance and the psychological well-being and motivation of followers (Nunes & Palma-Moreira, 2024; Schmidt, 2008; Ahmed et al., 2024). Though toxic leadership is undeniably a global epidemic, recent quantitative research has brought a specific and urgent focus to Malaysia—a culturally complex and hierarchically structured Southeast Asian society where prevalence and perception were empirically measured and diagnosed (Gandolfi et al., 2025). This diagnosis was critical not only in confirming the existence of the problem and the factors that perpetuate it, but

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also in revealing a sobering truth: toxic leadership in Malaysia is not just prevalent; it is persistent, systemic, and, frequently, normalized (Gandolfi et al., 2025).

A deeper focus is therefore necessary to understand what drives the systemic perpetuation of toxic leadership in Malaysia, with the long-term goal of breaking these cycles and reversing organizational toxicity. With this aim in mind, the present study adopts a quantitative approach focused on uncovering the emotional consequences, motivational attributions, and behavioral responses associated with toxic leadership. Thus, this paper extends prior research by shifting focus from identifying prevalence to examining why toxic leadership persists, how followers interpret and respond to it, and whether openings for change exist. To achieve this, the paper draws from the same dataset as its preceding work—The Shadow of Leadership: Examining the Prevalence of Toxic Leadership in Malaysia—(n=79) but analyzes a distinctly new set of questions, centering on followers' lived experience with toxic leadership, perceived leader motivation, coping responses, and openness to systemic change.

The objective of this paper is to critically examine three dominant, interrelated themes: the psychological impact of toxicity, perceptions of leader motivation, and coping behaviors such as silence and withdrawal, which offer insight into how followers internalize and navigate toxic leadership. A fourth, more emergent theme—openness to systemic change—was also present.

Structurally, this current paper first contextualizes these findings within the authors' prior Malaysian study on toxic leadership, alongside the broader literature on leadership and culture in the region and then discusses the study's methodology—quantitative measurement of subjective experience—and the data collection process. The results and discussion section explores each data theme through relevant leadership, organizational, cultural, and psychological frameworks. We anticipate that this progression -from what is happening, to why it is happening, to how it might be addressed - offers a deep and holistic understanding of toxic leadership's embedded dynamics in Malaysia.

The study data further uncovers critical takeaways for both scholars and practitioners. Specifically, the demonstrated inability to confront toxic leadership—and its subsequent normalization despite being deeply detrimental, has paradoxically embedded a measurable desire for change from the current state of systemic toxicity among Malaysian followers. Taken together, the study illuminates both the destructive endurance of toxic leadership and the fragile yet significant readiness among Malaysian followers for something different. This paper will conclude with future research recommendations among leadership scholars and practitioners alike.

BACKGROUND

The original study, *The Shadow of Leadership: Examining the Prevalence of Toxic Leadership in Malaysia*, validated what many followers across sectors had long suspected: toxic leadership is not just present but deeply entrenched in Malaysian organizations. More specifically, it is systemic, psychologically damaging, and often goes unchallenged due to deep cultural entrenchment. Using a quantitative instrument anchored in behavioral, emotional, and cultural theory, the study surveyed 79 participants across diverse industries and found that 80% had personally experienced toxic leadership, while 53% perceived the behavior as intentional (Gandolfi et al., 2025). Only 4% believed such actions were completely unintentional—suggesting that, in the eyes of followers, toxicity is not simply a matter of misunderstanding, circumstantial challenges, or stress-related fallout, but rather a consistent and deliberate pattern of harmful behavior toward followers. Participants also identified specific patterns of dysfunction, including inconsistency (63%), poor communication (56%), controlling tendencies (48%), toxic behavior (46%), and discouragement (44%), all of which were widely observed across sectors. Critically, these behaviors were attributed to underlying self-interest: 60% believed leaders were primarily motivated by personal gain, either financial or positional, while just 2% believed leaders were driven by a desire to help employees (Gandolfi et al., 2025). This evidence of perceived intent marked a significant shift from prior assumptions that toxicity might be reactive or unintentional. Combined with the finding that 98% believed public perception of leadership affects how others view their own work environment—alongside reported emotional outcomes of stress, frustration, demotivation, and depression—these results established a clear link between perceived intent, observable behavior, and psychological harm (Gandolfi et al., 2025).

These results raised several core insights that merit deeper exploration. First, toxic leadership has severely eroded trust between leaders and followers. While not unique to Malaysia, this breakdown in relational integrity, was intensified by the nation's extremely high-power distance culture, where deference to authority often silences dissent (Hofstede, 2001; Abdullah & Low, 2001). Second, cultural conformity—rooted in collectivist values—appears to reinforce silence, as those surveyed reported internalizing harmful norms rather than confront them (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Third, patterns of cognitive bias such as social projection and the false consensus effect were evident, revealing a shared belief among followers that their experiences of toxicity were widely mirrored by others, even when those assumptions had not been validated in a tangible way (Robbins & Krueger,

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2005; Ross et al., 1977). Together, these findings point to an organizational climate where toxicity is not only present—it is normalized, sadly expected, and harmfully replicated (Gandolfi et al., 2025).

While the original study served a critical diagnostic purpose—establishing prevalence, perception, and the enabling role of cultural and cognitive forces, it did not fully account for the psychological cost of toxic leadership or the internal processes followers undergo in response to prolonged exposure. In other words, it described *what exists* and *how it is sustained*, but left largely unanswered *why it continues*—a critical gap echoed in prior research. It is imperative to understand the phenomenon of toxic leadership as it undermines psychological health, promotes emotional exhaustion, and distorts individual coping responses over time (Einarsen et al., 2007; Tepper, 2000; Ahmed et al., 2024; Nunes & Palma-Moreira, 2024). Though these costs may be difficult to quantify in traditional business settings, they are not merely theoretical ones. When exposure to toxic leadership is prolonged and perceived as inescapable, followers may begin to emotionally disengage, self-silence, or even internalize the dysfunction—making it their own burden to shoulder—believing their circumstances are fixed or unchangeable (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Seligman, 1975). The emotional aftermath of toxic leadership—how individuals carry it beyond the workplace, absorb it into their sense of agency, or respond to it behaviorally—remains a critical and underexamined dimension—one for which genuine solutions have yet to emerge.

These questions—left open by the first study—precisely catalyzed this follow-up investigation. A broader lens is required to interrupt the self-reinforcing cycles that entrench toxic leadership—one that moves beyond organizational behavior alone to consider follower psychology, emotional response, and behavioral adaptation. The current study maintains the same methodological orientation—quantitative measurement of subjective experience—but focused on different subsets of survey items within the original instrument. The questions were not designed to measure prevalence or perception in isolation, but rather, to examine how individuals are affected, how they respond, and ultimately, whether there is a genuine starting point for possible change. This shift in scope—from external diagnosis to internal consequence—creates space to examine several previously unexplored dynamics: the whole-life psychological impact of toxic leadership (e.g., how experiences at work bleed into home life and return again with compounded emotional strain; see (Matos et al., 2018; Schmidt, 2014; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), follower interpretations of leader intent and the contextual conditions that shape those beliefs (Padilla et al., 2007; Bratman, 1987), the prevalence of psychologically driven avoidant coping behaviors such as withdrawal and silence (Seligman, 1975; Detert & Edmondson, 2011), and the presence of a genuine desire among followers for systemic change, supported in part by emergent constructs such as *collective efficacy* and *psychological safety* (Bandura, 2000; Edmondson, 1999). Each of these themes contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural persistence of toxic leadership, not as a static reality, but as a dynamic system fueled by fear, fatigue, normalization, and—despite it all—a degree of hope.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative methodology explicitly designed to measure subjective experience—specifically, the emotional responses, motivational attributions, and behavioral reactions of followers exposed to toxic leadership. This method is a validated and increasingly prominent approach in the behavioral and organizational sciences (Converse & Presser, 1986). While qualitative designs are often favored for studying lived experience, particularly in the realm of behavioral science—they are not without their limitations. First among these is the issue of interpretive bias (Patton, 2015). When assessing emotionally charged phenomena such as workplace toxicity, qualitative formats can introduce subjectivity not only from the participant, but also from the researcher during data coding and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This limitation becomes particularly problematic in cross-cultural environments—such as Malaysia—where implicit communication norms and cultural variance pose a distinct risk to obscure verbalized emotional content (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2012). Therefore, a quantitative framework was intentionally selected and designed to provide a more standardized, scalable, and replicable framework. Most importantly, it offered a more objective means of capturing follower sentiment relative to qualitative data collection.

The methodological design centers on the quantitative measurement of subjective experience, a validated and increasingly prominent approach in the behavioral and organizational sciences (Converse & Presser, 1986). Subjective experience, when operationalized appropriately, can be measured through structured instruments such as multiple choice and multi-response selection items, which offer respondents the ability to express affective, cognitive, and behavioral states in a controlled format (Bradburn et al., 2004). Studies in affective science have affirmed that well-constructed multiple-choice and scale-based instruments can reliably capture emotional and perceptual phenomena—particularly when questions are grounded in clear behavioral referents with accessible and unambiguous language (Mauss & Robinson, 2009; Jamieson, 2004). Furthermore, quantitative assessment enables the statistical identification of patterns and relationships between emotional impact, perceived leader motivation,

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and coping behavior—insights that are inherently difficult to generalize or categorize using qualitative methods such as interviews or narrative responses alone—reintroducing the challenge of interpretation bias and reinforcing quantitative analysis as the more objective choice for capturing meaningful data (Schwarz, 1999). By capturing subjective experience in a structured and statistically analyzable form, this methodology offers a balanced bridge between emotional nuance and empirical rigor. It permits deep insight into the individual realities of followers while enabling broader generalization of cultural and organizational patterns. In doing so, it aligns with recent calls in leadership research for methods that honor emotional truth without sacrificing analytic precision (Walter & Bruch, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Data were collected via electronic survey using a self-administered format, which allowed respondents to participate anonymously and at their convenience. This approach was chosen both for its accessibility and for its ability to reduce social desirability bias—particularly important when assessing sensitive topics such as leader intent, follower emotional response, and organizational silence (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). The survey was distributed across sectors and included both closed-ended and multi-response items, several of which allowed for multiple selections to reflect the complexity of emotional states. All survey items were designed to align with the research objectives of this second-stage study, which focused less on the identification of toxic behaviors but rather, on perceived leader intent, follower responses, emotional consequences, and the subsequent implications for systemic change.

The final subset of questions analyzed in this follow-up study were deliberately constructed to align with the study's four thematic aims: the whole-life psychological impact of toxic leadership, perceived leader motivation, follower coping behaviors, and openness to systemic change. The first question employed a multiple-choice format with forced-choice intensity scaling to assess the degree to which toxic leadership impacted respondents' work and personal lives. The next two questions utilized scaled multiple-choice responses to gauge perceived leader motivation, distinguishing between self-interest, organizational mission, and blended intent. Next, the survey adopted an open multi-response format with eleven pre-set behavioral responses and an "other" option to allow participants to reflect the nuance and variability of coping behaviors. Finally, the culminating question used a unipolar Likert scale to measure emotional receptivity to leadership reform. These formats are well supported in behavioral science literature for capturing emotional and cognitive data in a standardized, interpretable format (Haladyna & Downing, 1989; Jamieson, 2004). Additionally, open multi-response formats have been validated as effective tools for preserving psychological complexity while still permitting quantitative analysis (Mauss & Robinson, 2009). This instrument design allowed the research team to map each question set directly to the study's core analytical framework, ensuring both thematic cohesion and statistical clarity. The result is a methodologically coherent tool for uncovering not only the presence of toxic leadership, but also its perceived drivers, its personal impact, and the psychological orientation of a diverse group of followers toward future change.

Demographic data captured in this study mirror those reported in the original Shadow of Leadership study (Gandolfi et al., 2025), offering valuable context for interpreting results. The sample included respondents from 24 distinct industries, with representation across for-profit (77.2%), nonprofit (11.4%), government (6.3%), and transitional employment sectors including students and the unemployed (5.1%). The median organizational size was 250–500 employees, and the median age range was 45–54—aligning with Malaysia's adult working population. Collectively, this diverse sample reinforces the cultural and organizational relevance of the study's findings.

This study offers meaningful and robust insight into followers' lived experiences with toxic leadership in Malaysia, though three key limitations deserve acknowledgment. First, while the sample is diverse across sectors, industries, and age groups, its size (n = 79) may not fully capture the breadth of national experience. Second, the use of self-reported data introduces the possibility of bias or emotional distortion—an inherent challenge when addressing emotionally charged topics with human subjects. However, the survey's theoretical scaffolding and behavioral anchoring were intentionally designed to mitigate this risk. Third, although cultural specificity enhances contextual depth, it may limit generalizability to countries with different organizational norms. Despite these limitations, the consistency of responses and strong alignment with prior scholarship reinforce confidence in the credibility, relevance, and potential replicability of these findings.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

While toxic leadership is often discussed in abstract terms, the data presented here offer a grounded and unflinching view from those most affected: the followers. Their responses illuminate the emotional, professional, and cultural toll of toxicity—reframing it not as isolated misconduct, but as a deeply entrenched organizational condition. What follows is an objective presentation of follower-reported data and a comprehensive discussion of the four core themes that emerged from the analysis.

Whole-Life Impact

Survey results revealed the incredible statistics that 51.9% of respondents reported that toxic leadership negatively affected both their work and personal lives simultaneously, while an additional 31.6% reported negative work-related impacts alone. This means more than four out of five participants experienced direct consequences from toxic leadership, with over half reporting a full bleed-through into their personal lives. Disturbingly, only 7.6% of respondents indicated that toxic leadership has never impacted on their work or personal lives. These data suggest that the emotional and cognitive stressors of toxic leadership are not compartmentalized within the workplace—they follow individuals' home, straining relationships, disrupting rest, and compounding daily stress (George, 2023; Nunes & Palma-Moreira, 2024). Ahmed et al. (2024) found that emotional exhaustion not only mediates workplace deviance but contributes to a wider cycle of organizational cynicism and psychological distress, underscoring the long-term damage followers carry beyond the workplace. Gallup's State of the Global Workplace Report 2025 highlighted that merely 25% of the Malaysian workforce was engaged at work while only 32% reported perceiving themselves to thrive in life (Gallup, 2025). The same report highlighted the impact of managers in determining engagement levels; as well as the spillover effect on work into evaluating personal lives given the time employees spend at work. Consistently, a survey by REMOTE revealed Malaysia to rank second worst in terms of work-life balance (Sinar Daily, 2025). This may stem from the high power-distance (score of 100) as well as collectivist culture (score of 73) rooted in Malaysia (The Culture Factor Group, 2025). For example, an unspoken norm that mirrors the prevalence of high-power distance is the tendency of employees feeling pressurized not to leave work before their superior does. The collectivist nature of Malaysians also embodies the high levels of commitment towards their organizations, therefore prompting sense of belonging and duty to the organization (Triguero-Sánchez et al., 2022) that would result in the blurring of their work-life domains.

Emotional Toll

The emotional carryover from work to home life is consistent with existing research. Stress and anxiety stemming from toxic workplace environments often extend into personal domains, undermining followers' ability to maintain meaningful social relationships or engage in restorative activities (George, 2023). As followers ruminate on workplace toxicity, they may experience perseverative cognition, a state in which persistent worry prolongs physiological stress responses even after the workday ends (Brosschot et al., 2006). Over time, such chronic stress can impair emotional regulation and memory by disrupting hippocampal function (McEwen, 2007; Lupien et al., 2009). This process reflects what McEwen (2007) and Juster et al. (2010) describe as allostatic load—the accumulated burden of chronic stress on multiple regulatory systems within the human body. Followers may become emotionally depleted, socially disengaged, and mentally preoccupied (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022; Wang et al., 2023), with strained family relationships and reduced ability to detach from work stressors (Nauman et al., 2018). These patterns create a feedback loop in which unresolved stress at home reenters the workplace—amplifying toxicity, eroding resilience, and normalizing dysfunction. Leaders are typically the key decision-makers in control of employees' work (Lee et al., 2024). Borrowing from the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R theory), supervisory support is classified as a leader-level resource central to determining work engagement (Bakker et al., 2023); where lack thereof would be a significant predictor of burnout (Lesener et al., 2020). A recent study in the context of Malaysia highlighted that the prevalence of toxic leadership- which presents a job demand at work would reduce work engagement (Lee et al., 2024). The JD-R theory defines job demands "as the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical, cognitive, and/or emotional effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs" (Bakker et al., 2023, pp. 8-9; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Therefore, the activation of a health impairment process hedges on the severity of toxic leadership. In dealing with toxic leadership, followers will need to channel more effort at work- thus, further depleting their physical, emotional, and cognitive resources- thus, causing exhaustion and health-related issues (Bakker et al., 2023).

Physical Toll

The physiological consequences of toxic leadership are similarly profound. Sustained activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis elevates cortisol levels and can impair immune function, cardiovascular health, and sleep—each vital components of physiological and psychological function (Yaribeygi et al., 2017; James et al., 2023). Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory underscores how toxic environments drain the psychological, physical, and emotional reserves people rely on for stability in daily living. These resource losses may manifest in fatigue, somatic complaints, illness, or exacerbated chronic health conditions. In many cases, followers may not even recognize the workplace as the source of these health concerns, further obscuring the now clear connection between toxic leadership and whole-life wellbeing. The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory suggests that sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional demands can lead to burnout when not balanced by adequate resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This aligns with the World Health Organization's recognition of

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burnout as an occupational syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed (Gewin, 2021).

Performance and Financial Toll

At the organizational level, the costs of toxicity compound. Toxic leadership has been shown to significantly increase absenteeism, reduce productivity, and raise turnover intention (Einarsen et al., 2007; Harms et al., 2017). Meta-analytic findings further suggest that prolonged exposure to toxic supervision leads to frustration and burnout, diminishing both job and life satisfaction (Harms et al., 2011; Harms et al., 2017). These patterns undermine not only morale but also financial sustainability. As Iqbal (2022) notes, turnover driven by emotional burnout carries steep economic consequences, including lost productivity, retraining costs, and erosion of institutional knowledge. When hidden costs ranging from onboarding time to reduced team morale are considered (O'Connell & Kung, 2007; Tziner & Birati, 1996), the financial burden becomes even more evident. These costs may further compound employee anxiety, as organizational pressures naturally compound in seasons of financial duress—reinforcing the cycle of toxicity and institutional decline perpetuated by toxic leaders.

Toxic leadership does not remain confined to office walls or isolated interactions. It infiltrates personal relationships, disrupts health, and destabilizes organizational performance. The burdens it creates—emotional, physiological, and organizationally systemic—are carried home by followers and reintroduced into the workplace the next day. These compounding effects leave employees trapped in a feedback loop with no clear boundary between professional dysfunction and personal strain (Juster et al., 2010). Yet perhaps most unsettling to followers is not the toll of toxicity itself, but their growing belief that such harm is intentional.

The ethical values rooted in Malaysia's collectivist society is key to promote a culture of integrity and informed citizenship (Yusoff et al., 2023). As discussed in our first paper, the cultural facet describing this phenomenon highlights Malaysian's conformity towards the authority of leaders (Hofstede, 2001) thus, reiterating Malaysia's high-power distance culture. Malaysian followers may develop hostile attribution bias (Lyu et al., 2023) towards toxic leaders, such that any harm inflicted would have been intentional given the significant control and autonomy possessed by leaders (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2008). Such phenomenon can be understood with reference to the conservation of resources (COR) theory whereby followers with toxic leaders may experience a loss to their personal resources that activates a stress response which later translates into psychological distress (Chaudhary & Islam, 2023). Therefore, the resulting attribution bias would cause biased perceptions of intentional malice under situations that are unclear and ambiguous on what prompted leaders' behavior (Wu et al., 2020).

Self-Interest as a Perceived Driver of Toxic Leadership

Survey respondents indicated that a significant majority of followers attributed toxic leadership to self-serving motives rather than organizational mission. Specifically, 76% believed that toxic leaders were motivated either exclusively (38%) or primarily (38%) by personal gain, while an additional 11.4% believed self-interest was a factor—albeit not the primary one—leaving a staggeringly low 8.9% of respondents who saw no connection between self-interest and toxic leadership. Further, only 11.4% of respondents identified organizational goals as the sole driver of toxic leadership, and just 17.7% viewed them a primary influencer of toxic leadership—though not the exclusive motivator. In contrast, 65.8% of respondents believed that organizational mission was not a factor at all (27.8%) or were not a primary driver (38%) of toxic leadership—placing the spotlight squarely back on the leader. These findings suggest that most followers do not see toxicity as accidental or circumstantial—with only 3.8% believing such leadership was entirely unintentional. Thus, a clear picture emerges: followers overwhelmingly perceive toxic leadership not as a byproduct of pressure or miscommunication, but as a deliberate strategy for individual advancement.

These findings challenge earlier assumptions—anecdotal, social, or even literature-based—that toxic behavior may arise reactively under organizational strain or circumstantial pressures. Instead, the data suggest a more disillusioned—but perhaps more realistic—conclusion: many followers view toxic behaviors as premeditated tools for manipulating systems, dominating environments, and securing personal gain at the expense of others (Zaghmout, 2024). This aligns with existing literature, which describes toxic leaders as exploitative and opportunistic, often engaging in manipulation, credit-stealing, and other behaviors that undermine those they are supposed to support (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Gandolfi & Stone, 2022).

Perception and Psychological Safety

The ramifications of followers' belief that toxic leadership is driven by self-interest are substantial. As Edmondson (2018) argues, psychological safety hinges on the belief that individuals can take interpersonal risks, speak up, share ideas, or fail without fear of retaliation. However, when followers perceive their leaders as self-interested, that sense of safety erodes. Followers begin to guard themselves, suppress feedback, and disengage from collaborative processes—not out of apathy, but out of survival. What might have been interpreted as isolated

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missteps are reframed as calculated behaviors meant to exploit others. The psychological contract between leader and follower begins to unravel, and with it, the culture of trust that enables healthy engagement (Robinson & Morrison, 2000).

In such environments, even innocuous actions may be reinterpreted through a lens of suspicion. Praise can be seen as manipulation, feedback as punishment, and team-building efforts as disingenuous optics. The breakdown of trust fosters a state of hypervigilance, where followers become increasingly cynical and emotionally detached (Westover, 2024). These violates Malaysians' expectations for the civility, kindness, and respect among leaders (Richardson et al., 2016). This does not merely damage morale, it reshapes organizational norms. Self-protection replaces cooperation. Innovation is stifled. Risk-taking ceases. The leader's perceived self-interest becomes contagious, seeping into the broader organizational fabric, accelerating the normalization of distrust, and shaping the behaviors of others (Padilla et al., 2007). The phenomenon is explainable from the angle of the social cognitive theory which elucidates that individuals' self-regulation translates moral identity into action (Bandura, 1986); and that the amount of attention individuals pay to social environments would determine their level of being influenced by it (Bandura, 2001); as well as how these individuals respond to social environments subsequently. Leaders form part of the factors that shape moral identity (Jennings et al., 2015). This, in turn, triggers a compounding cycle of escalating self-interest within the organization.

Enablement and Erosion of Accountability

Each option carries negative consequences for both individuals and the broader organization—and may contribute to the normalization of toxic behavior over time. When followers witness unethical conduct met with reward or indifference, they may conclude that success depends less on collaboration and more on strategic manipulation (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Cortina & Magley, 2003). In such systems, followers are often left with three unpalatable choices: mimic the toxicity, tolerate it silently, or exit entirely. Each option carries negative consequences for both individuals and the broader organization. Many remain silent not out of ignorance, but due to fear of retaliation or futility in reporting—a dynamic well established in workplace silence literature (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). This fear of retaliation is no stranger in the Malaysian context - again, due to high levels of power distance rooted in its national culture. Leaders are scantly questioned as followers fear that speaking up may appear disrespectful or rebellious. Moreover, members of high-power distance societies tend to "rationalize" inequalities (Oruh & Dibia, 2020) as well as choose to remain silent out of fear or self-protection (Dai et al., 2022).

As Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) proposed in their "toxic triangle" framework, destructive leadership is rarely the result of individual pathology alone. It emerges from the convergence of toxic leaders, susceptible or constrained followers, and enabling environments. When accountability mechanisms, such as Human Resources (HR) or senior oversight, are perceived as weak, biased, or performative, and when performance metrics prioritize short-term gains over ethical behavior, toxicity becomes institutionalized (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). Over time, what was once considered deviant gradually becomes normalized, as moral voice is drowned out by fear or fatigue (Jennings et al., 2015). This normalization introduces a troubling degree of moral disengagement. When unethical behavior is continually rewarded or tolerated, individuals begin to rationalize it—redefining right and wrong to align with their need to survive within the system (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Moral clarity fades, complicity grows, and psychological safety deteriorates (Ogunfowora et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the highest-performing and most ethically grounded followers often leave—silently voting with their feet—taking with them not only talent, but also the organization's moral conscience (Sansone & Sansone, 2015). This is mirrored in Jennings et al.'s (2015) study which asserted that negative and unethical leader behaviors would diminish followers' moral-self.

The historical background in Malaysia tainted by corruption, authoritarianism, and patronage were instrumental in shaping skepticism towards leaders' motives. To illustrate the impact of these areas in shaping followers' perception towards leaders' intent- a corruption perception in Malaysia raked in 50 points, striking mid-point between highly corrupted and very clean (Transparency International Malaysia, 2025). This was attributed to the occurrence of bribery, embezzlement, fraud, among other forms of corruption in law enforcement, business governance, as well as major projects. What this implies is that the deterioration of one's moral self can occur as a result of observing the "norm" in their owning organizations as followers try to gain connections and improve self-esteem through seeking consistency with authority (Walton et al., 2012).

Contagion and Replication

Toxic leadership does not remain isolated within individual relationships in that it often becomes embedded in organizational culture. As followers adjust their behavior in response to perceived self-interest and psychological danger, many begin to model the very dysfunction they once opposed. This is not necessarily due to malice, but rather adaptation. In psychologically unsafe environments, individuals may rationalize that success requires self-

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preservation, strategic silence, or even mimicry of toxic behaviors (Saban, 2024). Over time, the boundary between coping and conformity blurs.

This behavioral shift has cascading effects. As Coakley (2021) notes, when integrity is no longer seen as a reliable path to success, employees may disengage from innovation, collaboration, or ethical advocacy. Instead, they internalize new norms that reward manipulation and penalize vulnerability. Peer trust erodes alongside leader trust, leaving followers unsure who they can rely on. In extreme cases, formerly ethical employees may adopt toxic strategies themselves; not because they agree with them, but because it feels like the only viable option in a hostile system.

The result is not just resignation or demoralization, it is replication. The perceived self-interest of leaders becomes a blueprint for survival, quietly reproduced across teams and departments. This cultural contagion makes systemic reform far more difficult, as toxicity is no longer confined to those at the top. It becomes woven into the everyday logic of the organization through the normalization of dysfunction, reinforced by practice, habit, and fear. Over time, perceived self-interest at the top transforms into a behavioral blueprint, shaping how others operate within the same system. In high power distance cultures, individuals would experience greater eagerness to be accepted by others (Riyadi et al., 2019). Besides, these individuals are more likely to uphold authority therefore causing a greater sense of fear of authority (Dai et al., 2022). In the end, when self-interest is seen not only as the motive behind toxic leadership but also as the logic required to survive it, dysfunction moves from exception to expectation thereby leaving followers trapped in a system they neither created nor condone but increasingly feel compelled to mirror.

Ignore Not Confront

Another striking theme that emerged from the data was how followers respond to toxic leadership. Despite clearly recognizing toxic behaviors and understanding their consequences, 51.9% of respondents reported that they chose to try and ignore the toxicity and just focus on their jobs. Instead, they withdrew emotionally, with nearly one-quarter reporting depression, anxiety, and/or increased overall stress (22.8%) and close to one-third of respondents resigning from their role altogether (31.6%). Additionally, followers sought counsel and comfort from peers (32.9%) and family members (26.6%) at very high rates, providing additional support for the whole-life impact of toxic leadership previously discussed. Conversely, only 8.9% of respondents contacted HR and a mere 1.3% escalated the toxic leadership to upper management. These behaviors reflect not apathy, but adaptation: followers are not blind to toxicity; they are exhausted by it and have developed the inverse of healthy responses, not because they want to, but because they may believe they have to. These adaptive behaviors, left unchecked, begin to contribute to the normalization of silence. This further validates responses from the first data set used in *The Shadow of Leadership*, where respondents were asked to describe how experiencing toxic leadership made them feel - frustration (64.6%), stress (53.2%), decreased motivation (51.9%), depression (40.5%), and anger (39.2%) (Gandolfi et al., 2025) - symptoms consistent with toxic workplace exposure (Pelletier, 2010). These charged emotional responses ranked high, even though current survey data shows that more than half of respondents felt unable or unwilling to confront the toxic leader. While the present dataset did not explicitly ask participants to identify emotions, their avoidance behaviors, withdrawal patterns, and exit decisions suggest a similarly intense affective climate. Avoidance, in these contexts, does not lessen the harm; it simply allows toxicity to go unchecked. Followers continue to carry its weight, even when they say nothing—and often especially when they do not.

Motivated by Fear

The survey clearly demonstrates that avoidance is rarely the result of indifference; it is more often rooted in fear. Many followers have legitimate reasons to stay silent, particularly in environments where speaking up is known to carry high costs (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). When previous complaints are ignored or punished, retaliation—both formal and informal—becomes an unspoken expectation. Employees internalize the message: raising concerns is dangerous and rarely rewarded (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). These consequences may be overt and severe; reprimands, demotions, or termination (Cortina & Magley, 2003), or subtle yet equally corrosive: exclusion from meetings, quiet removal of responsibilities, or deliberate micromanagement designed to force attrition. It is iterated that fear may induce individuals' compliance with unreasonable suggestions (Karakostas & Zizzo, 2016).

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory further reinforces this dynamic. According to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), leaders tend to form tight-knit in-groups while relegating others with dissenting views to out-groups. Those in the out-group are more likely to experience low-trust relationships, diminished protection, and greater risk of ostracism (Loi et al., 2014). These dynamics often deter reporting altogether—as reflected in the escalation data—as followers recognize that speaking up could reinforce their outsider status, cementing their vulnerability and further reducing their access to future support.

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Distrust of Oversight Systems

While avoidance is often rooted in fear, it is also shaped by institutional distrust. As noted earlier, few respondents turned to formal accountability channels when experiencing toxic leadership—choosing instead to confide in peers or family members, resign, or perhaps worse, simply doing nothing. This reluctance reflects more than personal preference; it signals a broader breakdown in the perceived legitimacy of organizational oversight. Followers are not merely avoiding confrontation; they are bypassing systems they no longer view as safe, responsive, or neutral.

These hesitations stem from perceived breaches in the psychological contract. When organizations publicly tout "open door" policies but fail to act when employees come forward, those promises begin to ring hollow (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Systems designed to provide safety are increasingly viewed as performative. A 2023 NAVEX benchmark found that only 27% of anonymous complaints received any follow-up—leaving nearly three-quarters completely uninvestigated. In such environments, silence becomes normalized not because employees do not care, but because they do not believe action will follow thereby intensifying distrust in the organization and its leadership (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

As a result, moral self-regulation is eroded (Ogunfowora et al., 2022). Abusive supervision and perceived organizational politics, both byproducts of failed oversight, encourage moral disengagement. Employees learn to rationalize inaction, believing it is not their role to intervene, particularly when the system signals that even legitimate concerns will be met with indifference or risk (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). When silence becomes routine and accountability performative, the cost is not just disengagement; it is the quiet decay of ethical culture itself.

The Burden of Accountability

Ironically, in many organizations, the burden of accountability falls heaviest on those with the least power—followers, not leaders (Bastardoz & Adriaensen, 2023). HR, in theory, should offer a neutral and supportive channel. But in practice, HR departments are often seen as extensions of executive leadership rather than independent guardians of employee welfare (Purcell et al., 2003; Beer et al., 2015). The U.S. Judiciary's 2023 National Workplace Survey (reported by Reuters on Mar 31, 2025) revealed only 42% were comfortable reporting misconduct, affirming that even when complaints are filed, the process is frequently opaque and slow, with little transparency or follow-through.

When toxic leaders are also powerful, followers rationally conclude that HR's hands are tied, or worse, aligned with the very individuals causing harm (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Tepper, 2007). This disempowers followers and reinforces a dangerous message: not only must you navigate harm, but you must do so alone. In such conditions, the normalization of dysfunction becomes inevitable (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Followers learn that enduring toxicity is simply part of the job, and that resistance is futile.

Perceived Willing Compliance

Finally, and perhaps most damaging, is how silence is misinterpreted. In the absence of direct resistance, toxic leaders often assume that their behavior is unnoticed, accepted, or worse, appreciated (Padilla et al., 2007). This perceived compliance emboldens further harm, escalating mistreatment, destabilizing teams, and corroding the organizational culture over time (Pelletier, 2010). Psychological safety gives way to psychological danger. Rather than encouraging innovation or error-reporting, workplaces become arenas of suspicion and self-censorship (Edmondson & Lei, 2014), where survival consumes a disproportionate share of followers' mental energy. As mistrust grows and bonds erode, followers become uncertain about whom they can depend on (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In these conditions, individuals often become isolated, fearful, and emotionally depleted (Nauman et al., 2018). Research links these climates to increased turnover, workplace bullying, and diminished job satisfaction (Sansone & Sansone, 2015; Al-Atwi et al., 2021).

Over time, what begins as silence morphs into normalization; a quiet culture of moral disengagement where complicity is mistaken for loyalty, and speaking out feels more dangerous than staying quiet (Saban, 2024). Ultimately, the absence of confrontation should not be mistaken for ignorance, cowardice, or support. It is often a rational response to disempowerment and institutional failure (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). When followers no longer believe that their voices will be heard, or that harm will be addressed, they adapt. They disengage emotionally, normalize dysfunction, and come to see survival as more important than truth.

The cumulative effect of fear, silence, and institutional failure is the quiet entrenchment of toxic leadership as a normalized feature of organizational life. And yet, normalization does not equal acceptance. Beneath the fatigue and disengagement, many followers expressed a clear desire for change—not only in leadership behavior, but in the systems that protect or perpetuate harm. These findings suggest that while followers may feel disempowered, most still hold a quiet hope that leadership transformation is possible. The final section explores this often-overlooked insight: that meaningful change must begin with those in power.

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Desired Change

Amid exhaustion, silence, and disengagement, one final theme stood out as a beacon of hope: a genuine desire for change. While many followers felt unable or unwilling to confront toxicity directly, they remain deeply invested in the possibility of something better. A striking 57% of respondents said they would be *extremely excited* if their organization sought strategies to combat and prevent toxic leadership, while 27.8% expressed they would have some excitement regarding such an endeavor, and only some would be neutral (11.4%) or unexcited (3.8%) about this type of strategic priority. 84.8% remain open to the possibility of better leadership, meaning they have not given up, a finding of critical importance.

This desire and willingness stand in stark contrast to the damage described in earlier themes. Toxic leadership, by design, corrodes psychological safety, fractures trust, and fosters climates of fear and resignation (Edmondson, 1999). What followers appear to long for is aligned with literature not perfection, but integrity—leadership rooted in purpose and guided by values. Theoretical frameworks such as servant leadership (Spears, 2011) and authentic leadership (Klenke, 2007) offer compelling alternatives, emphasizing empathy, self-awareness, and moral clarity. These models are associated with higher levels of trust, engagement, and follower wellbeing (Bhatti et al., 2021), underscoring the growing gap between what followers experience and what they hope to see.

This emerging hope is not merely individual—it may signal a form of *collective efficacy*, defined as a group's shared belief in its ability to achieve change (Bandura, 1997; Cohen et al., 2005). As followers compare notes and share experiences, their desire for something better becomes more cohesive—and potentially more catalytic. Though diffuse and likely unorganized at this stage, such collective awareness can lay the foundation for long-term momentum if met with timely leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Still, the cost of sustaining hope in a toxic system should not be underestimated. Gaillard and Wientjes (1994) describe *mental load* as the sustained internal effort required to cope with ongoing strain. In toxic environments, this burden includes not only enduring harm but also imagining the possibility of improvement. Drawing on psychological capital theory, hope is a dual process of agency (the will to persevere) and pathways thinking (the ability to chart new routes forward) (Luthans et al., 2007). Followers must engage both—often without institutional support. Over time, even the most resilient employees begin to tire—when hope collapses, disengagement deepens—not just from the leader, but from the mission, the team, and the organization as a whole (Lin et al., 2023).

It is also important to recognize that desire does not equate to ability. Wanting change is not the same as knowing how to achieve it. Followers lack trust in formal channels (Li, 2021), fear retaliation (Lipman-Blumen, 2005), and often feel uncertain about where to begin (Al-Atwi et al., 2021). As change-readiness research reminds us, acknowledgment alone is not enough; followers also need structure, language, and support to translate frustration into forward movement (Armenakis & Harris, 2009; Burnes, 2004).

Unequivocally, the data make clear that followers are not merely aware of toxicity—they are burdened by it, emotionally exhausted by it, and quietly yearning for something better. What remains uncertain is whether the systems around them can transform that yearning into meaningful, lasting change. To that end, the following insights represent both practical and culturally relevant imperatives moving forward.

CRITICAL TAKEAWAYS

The findings from this study underscore two vital insights into the persistence and lived impact of toxic leadership in Malaysia. These enduring insights hold significance not only for scholars advancing the theoretical conversation, but also for practitioners navigating the organizational and human consequences of toxicity.

Perceived Leader Self-Interest as the Accelerant of Toxicity and Whole-Life Harm

Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is that followers overwhelmingly interpret toxic leadership through the lens of self-interest. More than three-quarters of respondents, as reported in the survey, believed their leaders were motivated by personal gain rather than organizational purpose, with only a small minority perceiving toxicity as unintentional. This attribution reshapes the traditional discourse of follower–leader relations at their core. When followers believe leaders act for themselves, psychological safety collapses: interpersonal risks such as speaking up, sharing dissent, or innovating become too costly (Edmondson, 1999; Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Suspicion replaces trust, and what might once have been framed as errors of judgment are now experienced as deliberate acts of exploitation (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Zaghmout, 2024).

The corrosive effects do not remain bound by the workplace. The study data reveal that more than half of followers experience negative consequences of toxic leadership in both work and personal domains simultaneously, with only 7.6% reporting no impact at all. The emotional and cognitive strain of toxicity bleeds into home life, disrupting family relationships, compounding stress, and contributing to physiological wear consistent with

allostatic load (Brosschot et al., 2006; McEwen, 2007; Juster et al., 2010). Cultural dynamics intensify this spillover: in Malaysia's high power-distance and collectivist context, organizational dysfunction easily invades domestic boundaries (The Culture Factor Group, n.d.; Triguero-Sánchez et al., 2022). As Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources theory suggests, prolonged loss of emotional and psychological reserves cascades into fatigue, illness, and disengagement across life domains. In this light, toxicity is not merely a workplace pathology but a whole-life harm—one rooted in followers' conviction that leaders act for themselves rather than for the collective good.

The Normalization Loop: Silence, Institutional Failure, and Fragile Hope for Change

A second essential takeaway is how followers' adaptive silence transforms into toxic leadership being normalized. Despite acute awareness of harm, more than half of respondents chose to ignore toxic behavior and focus on their work, while nearly one-third resigned outright—an act that, in many cases, requires significant personal and professional disruption. Only 8.9% approached HR and only 1.3% escalated toxic behavior to senior management. These figures reveal not passivity, but fear and futility. In high-power-distance systems, where speaking up risks reprisal or ostracism, followers rationally calculate that confrontation will only worsen their situation (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Dai et al., 2022). When accountability mechanisms are distrusted - HR is perceived as aligned with executives and oversight bodies as performative - silence becomes the safest strategy (Purcell et al., 2003; Beer et al., 2015). The result is a looping dynamic: fear produces silence; silence is misinterpreted as compliance; compliance emboldens leaders and erodes organizational ethics further (Pelletier, 2010; Jennings et al., 2015).

Over time, this cycle leads to moral disengagement, where employees normalize dysfunction simply to persist day-to-day (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004; Ogunfowora et al., 2022). In such environments, toxicity migrates from the actions of individual leaders into the cultural fabric itself, replicated across teams and departments as a blueprint for survival (Saban, 2024). This dynamic explains why followers describe toxicity as not only persistent but systemic and unbreakable. And yet, normalization does not equate to acceptance. A striking 84.8% of respondents remain open to better leadership, with 57% saying they would be "extremely excited" by organizational efforts to combat toxicity and toxic leadership. Beneath the fatigue, hope endures—an emergent form of collective efficacy that, if given structure and protection, could serve as a foundation for change (Bandura, 1997; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Together, these insights underscore that while toxic leadership in Malaysia is entrenched, it is not immutable—pointing directly to the need for careful, context-sensitive reflection moving forward.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Toxic leadership in Malaysia is neither an isolated phenomenon nor a fleeting dysfunction. Indeed, it is a systemic condition that infiltrates organizations, erodes psychological safety, and inflicts lasting harm on followers' professional and personal lives. This study validates that followers overwhelmingly perceive toxic leadership as deliberate and self-serving, a finding that reshapes traditional assumptions of leadership failure as circumstantial or accidental. The consequences extend far beyond the workplace, manifesting themselves in emotional exhaustion, strained relationships, physical health deterioration, and diminished organizational performance.

Equally important, the findings reveal the normalization loop that sustains toxicity: fear-driven silence, institutional failure, and the perception that accountability systems are ineffective. This cycle perpetuates disengagement and moral erosion, embedding toxic practices into the cultural fabric of organizations. Yet, amid fatigue and resignation, a fragile but significant hope remains in those surveyed individuals expressed openness, even enthusiasm, toward systemic efforts to confront toxic leadership and embrace healthier models of leadership.

The persistence of toxicity alongside the desire for change underscores a pressing challenge and a critical opportunity. Breaking entrenched cycles will require more than individual awareness; it demands organizational courage, culturally sensitive reforms, and leadership models rooted in integrity, empathy, and accountability. For scholars, these findings call for deeper exploration of the psychological toll of toxicity and the mechanisms of collective efficacy that may catalyze reform. For practitioners, the findings highlight the urgency of dismantling enabling structures and cultivating environments where follower voices can safely drive transformation. Ultimately, toxic leadership in Malaysia is not immutable. By acknowledging its costs and acting upon the latent desire for change, organizations can begin to emerge from the shadows of toxicity toward healthier, more sustainable futures.

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