



Perceived Organizational Support and Ethical Behaviour in Malaysia's Service Sectors: The Moderating Role of Job Autonomy

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Abstract

Ethical behaviour underpins organizational performance and stakeholder trust, yet the conditions that systematically promote it remain incompletely specified. This study examines whether perceived organizational support (POS) fosters ethical behaviour and whether job autonomy conditions this association. Guided by Organizational Support Theory and Self-Determination Theory, we employed a cross-sectional survey of employees in the education, healthcare, and finance sectors. POS, job autonomy, and ethical behaviour were measured with validated scales, and relationships were estimated using structural equation modeling with moderation analysis. Findings indicate that POS is positively associated with ethical behaviour, and this association is significantly stronger at higher levels of job autonomy. Simple-slope analyses show the highest ethical conduct among employees reporting both high POS and high autonomy, whereas the effect of POS attenuates when autonomy is low. These results refine the POS–ethics nexus by identifying autonomy as a contextual amplifier and suggest that supportive climates may be insufficient without commensurate discretion in task execution. Practically, organizations seeking to enhance ethical conduct should align initiatives that signal support—such as recognition, fair treatment, and adequate resources—with job designs that expand meaningful autonomy. Taken together, these interventions can cultivate ethically engaged workforces and, in turn, reinforce organizational performance and stakeholder trust.

Keywords: *Perceived Organizational Support, Job Autonomy, Ethical Behaviour, Moderation, Organizational Ethics, Structural Equation Modelling*

INTRODUCTION

Ethical behaviour is a cornerstone of organizational legitimacy and sustained performance, particularly in professionalised service settings where employees' discretionary judgments shape outcomes and stakeholder trust. In Malaysia's education, healthcare, and finance sectors, rapid digitalisation, hybrid work, and heightened governance expectations have increased both decision latitude and exposure to ethically ambiguous situations. Concurrently, national guidance—most notably the Malaysian Code on Corporate Governance (MCCG 2021) and Bursa Malaysia's Sustainability Reporting Guide (3rd ed.)—has amplified board and managerial accountability for culture and conduct, sharpening the practical urgency to understand how organizational conditions translate into everyday ethical action among employees (Securities Commission Malaysia, 2021; Bursa Malaysia, 2022).

Perceived Organizational Support (POS)—employees' belief that the organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being—offers a theoretically grounded route to ethical conduct. Organizational Support Theory (OST) proposes that POS satisfies socio-emotional needs and elicits a felt obligation to reciprocate through value-congruent behaviours, stronger commitment, and reduced deviance (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Meta-

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analytic evidence consolidates POS as a robust predictor of favourable work attitudes and behaviours, underscoring its centrality in organizational behaviour research (Kurtessis et al., 2017). Yet a prominent limitation in this literature is the tendency to treat POS as a uniformly positive driver, leaving the boundary conditions—that is, when POS is most consequential for ethics—insufficiently specified.

Job Autonomy—discretion over methods, scheduling, and decision latitude—may be a pivotal boundary condition. Classic job design theory argues that autonomy fosters experienced responsibility and intrinsic motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), while Self-Determination Theory highlights autonomy as essential to internalisation and volitional regulation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). These mechanisms are directly relevant to ethical behaviour: higher autonomy should facilitate reflective judgement, resistance to unethical directives, and translation of supportive cues into principled action. Conversely, where autonomy is low, employees may intend to act ethically yet lack the discretion to do so, muting the practical impact of supportive climates. Reviews in behavioural ethics similarly emphasise that ethical outcomes arise from the interaction between individual motivation and organisational context, rather than from isolated structural features (Treviño et al., 2006).

Against this backdrop, what remains to be investigated is not merely the existence of a positive association between POS and ethical behaviour—prior work already suggests such a link—but rather its conditionality on Job Autonomy and its manifestation in Malaysia's service sectors, where professional discretion and compliance pressures co-exist. We propose that POS will more strongly predict ethical behaviour when Job Autonomy is higher because autonomy provides the discretionary “space” through which supportive norms are enacted. This moderation thesis integrates OST with Self-Determination Theory and job design research, specifying a theoretically coherent interaction that clarifies when supportive climates translate into ethical action (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Empirically, it addresses a contextual gap by focusing on Malaysian education, healthcare, and finance organisations exposed to MCGG-aligned governance expectations and sustainability scrutiny (Securities Commission Malaysia, 2021; Bursa Malaysia, 2022).

Accordingly, this study aims to achieve two objectives. First, we estimate the direct effect of Perceived Organizational Support (POS) on Ethical Behaviour using validated measures, consistent with OST's reciprocity and internalisation mechanisms (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Second, we test whether Job Autonomy moderates this relationship, such that the association is stronger at higher levels of autonomy. To support construct validity and precise estimation of conditional effects, we used hierarchical regression and the PROCESS macro with simple-slope probing (Hayes, 2018; Kline, 2016). This design allows us to quantify the conditions under which investments in supportive climates yield the greatest ethical returns—evidence that is actionable for managers tasked with aligning culture, control, and autonomy in governance-intensive environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical Behaviour at Work

Ethical Behaviour comprises employee actions that are consistent with moral principles and organisational norms and that protect stakeholder interests (e.g., truthfulness, fairness, respect). Evidence synthesised in behavioural ethics indicates that ethical outcomes arise from the interaction between individual motivation and contextual structures rather than from formal policies alone (Treviño et al., 2006). Studies often use adjacent outcomes—higher organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and lower counterproductive work behaviour—as indicators of value-congruent action (Podsakoff et al., 2009).

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Ethical Behaviour

Organizational Support Theory (OST) defines POS as employees' global beliefs that the organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). POS satisfies socio-emotional needs and elicits a felt obligation to reciprocate through behaviours that advance organisational interests, including adherence to shared values (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Meta-analytic findings show robust links between POS and favourable attitudes/behaviours (commitment, performance, OCB; lower withdrawal), implying a plausible positive pathway from POS to Ethical Behaviour via reciprocity and value internalisation (Kurtessis et al., 2017).

Job Autonomy and Ethical Behaviour

Job Autonomy—discretion over methods, scheduling, and decision latitude—is central to the Job Characteristics Model; it heightens perceived responsibility and intrinsic motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Self-Determination Theory likewise positions autonomy as a basic psychological need that enables internalisation and volitional self-regulation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). These mechanisms are directly relevant to ethics: autonomy supports reflective judgement and empowers employees to resist unethical directives; low autonomy constrains principled action even when intentions are ethical.

Autonomy as a Boundary Condition of the POS→Ethical Behaviour Link

POS may provide capacity and motivation (resources, trust, belonging), but employees require discretionary space to enact ethical choices. Integrating OST with job design and Self-Determination Theory implies a first-order interaction: the POS→Ethical Behaviour relationship should be stronger when Job Autonomy is higher because autonomy enables supported employees to implement value-consistent courses of action (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kurtessis et al., 2017). Behavioural ethics reviews reinforce this joint-determination logic (Treviño et al., 2006). Empirically, however, moderation tests focused on Ethical Behaviour (distinct from OCB) remain limited—leaving a boundary-condition gap.

Context: Malaysian Service Sectors

Malaysia's education, healthcare, and finance sectors combine high professional discretion with intensified governance and sustainability expectations under the Malaysian Code on Corporate Governance (MCCG 2021) and Bursa Malaysia's Sustainability Reporting Guide (3rd ed.). These institutional pressures heighten the salience of day-to-day ethical choices and make it practically important to identify conditions under which supportive climates translate into Ethical Behaviour (Securities Commission Malaysia, 2021; Bursa Malaysia, 2022).

Despite robust links between POS and favourable work behaviours, evidence on ethical behaviour specifically—and the boundary conditions that amplify POS—is limited. Prior work often infers ethics from adjacent constructs (e.g., OCB) and under-examines whether job autonomy enables the translation of supportive cues into principled action. We address this gap by testing autonomy as a first-order moderator of the POS–ethics relationship in Malaysian service organizations exposed to heightened governance scrutiny, clarifying when and where supportive climates yield the greatest ethical returns.

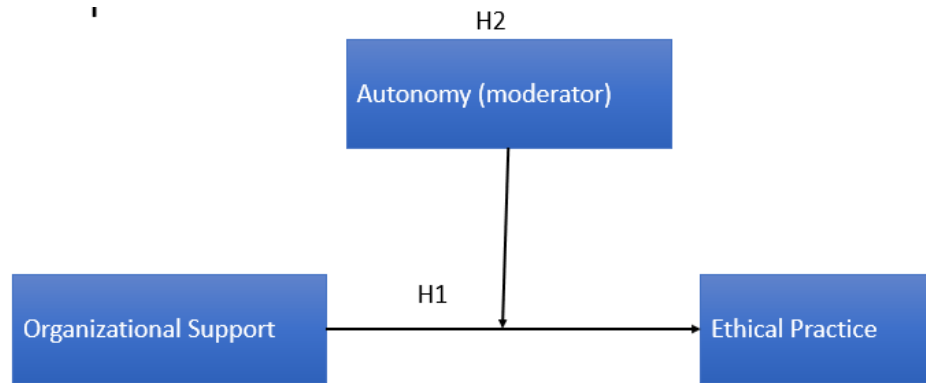


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Organizational Support Theory

Organizational Support Theory posits that when employees perceive high levels of support, they develop stronger affective attachment and feel an obligation to reciprocate through positive work behaviours (Tan et al., 2023). Ethical behaviour is one such manifestation, particularly when employees feel their values align with those of the organization.

Job Autonomy and Ethical Behaviour

Job autonomy can promote ethical behavior by encouraging a stronger sense of responsibility and moral accountability. In autonomous environments, employees are more likely to rely on their personal ethical standards and to feel psychologically safe in acting on them.

Hypotheses Development

Organizational Support and Ethical Behaviour

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) is generated by employees' perceptions of how they, in turn, are rewarded and supported when contributing to an organization (Eisenberger & Rhoades, 2001). Above all, the literature suggests that POS also stimulates social exchange behaviours such as Organizational Citizenship Behaviours (OCB), affective commitment, and ethical engagement (Watto et al., 2020; Eisenberger et al., 2020).

When employees perceive their organization as supportive, they are more likely to align their actions with organizational values and engage in ethical conduct, even in challenging or ambiguous situations (Islam et al., 2024). Supportive environments promote psychological safety, reduce fear of retaliation, and increase moral agency.

H1: Perceived Organizational Support (POS) positively predicts ethical behaviour.

Autonomy as a Moderator

Autonomy refers to the degree of freedom and discretion an individual has in carrying out their tasks. According to self-determination theory, autonomy strengthens intrinsic motivation and fosters a sense of ownership over decision-making, including ethical decisions. In such settings, perceived organizational support may be more effectively translated into ethical actions because employees have the discretion to act on their values.

In contrast, in environments with low autonomy, support may be present; however, employees may still feel constrained or powerless and unable to act in morally appropriate ways. Therefore, it is assumed that the positive impact of perceived organizational support on ethical behaviour will be greater in a high autonomy situation.

H2: Job autonomy moderates the POS–ethical behaviour relationship, such that the association is stronger at higher autonomy.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Data Collection

The paper used both quantitative and cross-sectional surveys of full-time employees in the Port Klang district of Malaysia across the education, healthcare, and finance sectors to test relationships among perceived organizational support, ethical behaviour, and job autonomy. A cross-sectional approach was chosen because it effectively captures data from a large number of participants across the education, healthcare, and finance sectors at a single point in time, making it particularly suitable for exploratory studies of behavioral patterns within organizational contexts..

Sample and Procedure

A stratified random sampling procedure was used to select interviewees from the education, healthcare, and finance sectors to enhance generalizability. The population of interest comprised all full-time workers with at least 1 year of experience in their organization, ensuring familiarity with the organization's support systems and culture.

The data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed via organisational gatekeepers and professional networks. The respondents provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and could participate voluntarily prior to starting the survey.

Measurement Instruments

This research employed a structured questionnaire comprising three constructs: perceived organizational support, job autonomy, and ethical behaviour. The validated instruments used in previous studies were employed to measure all constructs. The items were answered on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Perceived Organizational Support (POS)

Perceived organizational support was operationalized using the 8-item version of the Organizational Support Scale, originally developed by [Eisenberger et al. \(1986\)](#), which is widely used in recent organizational research ([Tan et al., 2023](#)). This scale measures the extent to which employees perceive their organization as valuing their efforts and being concerned with their welfare.

Job Autonomy

The Autonomy Subscale of [Hackman and Oldham \(1976\)](#), included in the Job Diagnostic Survey, was used to measure job autonomy. This scale measures the degree of freedom, independence, and discretion that employees have in their work.

Ethical Behaviour

Ethical behavior was measured using a six-item scale adapted from previous empirical studies on workplace ethics.. These were items customized to represent typical ethical choices and behaviours in organizational contexts.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and the PROCESS macro (Model 1) developed by [Hayes \(2018\)](#) to examine both direct and moderating effects. The

analysis involved the following steps: descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the sample characteristics and the distributions of the variables. Reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was conducted to assess the internal consistency of each measurement scale. Correlation analysis was performed to examine initial relationships among variables. Hypothesis testing:

- H1 (Direct effect) was tested using hierarchical regression analysis.
- H2 (Moderation effect) was evaluated using moderated regression with interaction terms via the PROCESS macro.

All statistical analyses were conducted at the significance level $p < .05$. Assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were checked to validate the robustness of the regression models.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α	No. of Items
Perceived Organizational Support (POS)	3.85	0.62	0.88	8
Job Autonomy	3.72	0.58	0.82	4
Ethical Behaviour	4.10	0.55	0.86	6

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3
Perceived Organizational Support (POS)	1		
Job Autonomy	.45	1	
Ethical Behaviour	.52	.40	1

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Ethical Behaviour

Model	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	Sig.	R ²	ΔR^2
1	POS	.45	.07	.52	6.43	.000	.27	-
2	POS, Autonomy	.38	.07	.44	5.22	.000	.33	.06
3	POS, Autonomy, POS \times Autonomy	.31	.09	.29	3.45	.001	.38	.05

POS predicted ethical behaviour ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$). Adding autonomy increased explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .06$), with both POS ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$) and autonomy ($\beta = .29$, $p < .01$) significant. The POS \times Autonomy interaction was significant ($\beta = .29$, $p < .01$; $\Delta R^2 = .05$; Model 3). Simple-slope tests indicated a stronger POS effect at high autonomy. POS significantly predicts ethical behaviour. Autonomy adds incremental predictive power, and the interaction term (POS \times Autonomy) is significant, supporting the moderation hypothesis.

Descriptive and Reliability Analysis

Table 1 includes the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for each of the study variables. The mean score for Perceived Organizational Support (POS) was 3.85 (SD = .62), reflecting a moderate-to-high level of perceived support among participants. Mean Job Autonomy= 3.72 (SD= 0.58), Ethical Behaviour= 4.10 (SD= 0.55), Table A1 Mean \pm SD for each of the dimensions on a scale from one to five, with two representing certainly not true and five indicating definitely true, suggesting that there is little difference in how employees evaluate their experiences across both

items Each of the constructs exhibited acceptable to excellent internal consistency reliability. The Cronbach's alpha for POS was 0.88; for Autonomy, 0.82; and for Ethical Behaviour, all exceeded the recommended threshold. These results indicated that the scales possess good reliability.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analyses (Pearson correlations) were conducted among the three main variables. Table 2 Correlations: POS positively correlated with Ethical Behaviour ($r = .52, p < .01$), suggesting that more ethical behavior is associated with how employees perceive support from their organization. Autonomy was also positively correlated with Ethical Behaviour ($r = .40, p < .01$) and POS ($r = .45, p < .01$), supporting the contention that these constructs are related and collectively contribute to ethical outcomes in organizations.

Processor Significance via Regression Analysis

Hypotheses were tested using a hierarchical regression.

- Model 1: POS on Ethical Behaviour (H1), the findings indicated that Processor Significance positively predicted Ethical Behaviour ($\beta = .52, p < .001$), consistent with Hypothesis 1. Source: It means that the greater the extent to which employees feel their employer values or regards them positively and supports them, the more likely they are.
- Model 2, Autonomy has been a new feature. Both POS ($\beta = .44, p < .001$) and Autonomy ($\beta = .29, p < .01$) were significant predictors: Autonomy added unique variance to Ethical Behaviour (R-squared = .38)
- Model 3 included the interaction term (POS \times Autonomy) to examine our moderation hypothesis (H2), The effect was moderated by the interaction ($\beta = .29, p < .01$), thus supporting Hypothesis 2 — Autonomy interacts with POS to predict Ethical Behaviour.

Discussion

We find that POS correlates with increased ethical behaviour, and that the autonomy boundary condition is critical: the most effective supportive climates involve employees who are free to behave as they wish. This explains why POS is ethically effective at times, an under-specified fact in the existing literature that tends to emphasize OCB and not ethical behavior itself. In Malaysian service industries operating under MCGG and Bursa sustainability requirements, support and autonomy are the most effective means of reinforcing their day-to-day ethical decisions.

This study contributes to both Perceived Organizational Support Theory and Job Characteristics Theory by highlighting the joint role of relational (POS) and structural (Autonomy) work conditions in influencing ethical conduct. From a practical perspective, organizations should aim not only to demonstrate support but also to design jobs that provide sufficient autonomy to maximize ethical outcomes.

Theoretical Implications

These findings extend the application of Organizational Support Theory by integrating job autonomy as a contextual moderator. While POS alone encourages ethical behaviour, its impact is amplified in environments that allow for independent decision-making. This highlights the importance of both structural (autonomy) and relational (support) elements in shaping workplace ethics.

Practical Implications

For practitioners and organizational leaders, the results underscore the value of cultivating

a supportive culture alongside granting employees greater discretion in their roles. HR strategies that invest in employee support systems and flexible job designs may help institutionalize ethical behaviour more effectively.

Limitations and Future Research

Causal interpretations should be made cautiously, given the cross-sectional nature of this study. Longitudinal or experimental future research should confirm these results. Future research could also consider additional moderators (e.g., organizational justice, ethical leadership styles) to examine their role in the process.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that POS fosters ethical behaviour and that job autonomy amplifies this effect. For organizations in Malaysia's education, healthcare, and finance sectors, investing in supportive practices (e.g., fair treatment, recognition, resource provision) alongside autonomy-enhancing job design can yield stronger ethical conduct under MCCG-aligned governance pressures. Future work should validate these effects using longitudinal designs and multi-source measures.

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