Research Paper

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 patterns 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-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, when autonomy is low, employees may intend to act ethically yet lack the discretion to do so, thereby attenuating 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 MCCG-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). 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: autonomy heightens experienced 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.
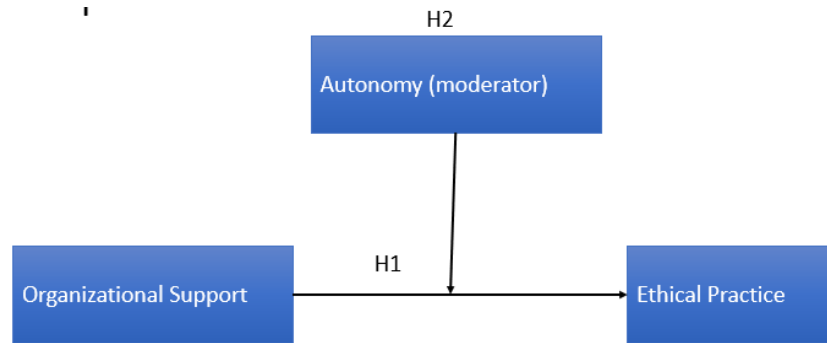
Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

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, especially when employees feel their values are aligned with those of the organization.

Job Autonomy and Ethical Behaviour

Job autonomy can enhance ethical behaviour by fostering a sense of responsibility and moral agency, as greater discretion over work processes increases employees' ownership of decisions and accountability for outcomes (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Hannah et al., 2011).

Hypotheses Development

Organizational Support and Ethical Behaviour

Perceived organizational support (POS) is generated by the perception of employees about how they, in turn, are rewarded and looked after 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

Job autonomy refers to the degree of freedom and discretion employees have in determining how they carry out their work tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). According to Self-Determination Theory, autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation by supporting internalisation, self-regulation, and a sense of ownership over one's actions, including decisions with moral or ethical implications (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Under conditions of high autonomy, employees are therefore better able to translate perceived organisational support into ethical actions, as they possess the discretion to act in accordance with internalised values rather than merely comply with external expectations.

In contrast, in low-autonomy work settings, organisational support may be present, but employees can still feel constrained, dependent, or powerless, limiting their capacity to act on ethical judgments even when they are motivated to do so. Empirical evidence suggests that without

sufficient autonomy, supportive contexts may fail to produce proactive or morally responsible behaviour because employees lack control over decision implementation (Chiniara & Bentein, 2016; Parker et al., 2001). Accordingly, the positive effect of perceived organisational support on ethical behaviour is expected to be stronger when job autonomy is high.

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

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships between perceived organizational support, ethical behaviour, and job autonomy among full-time employees working in the education, healthcare, and finance sectors in the Port Klang district of Malaysia. Cross-sectional survey designs are widely used in organisational and behavioural research because they effectively capture perceptual and behavioural data from large numbers of respondents at a single point in time, particularly for examining theoretically grounded relationships in workplace settings (Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Sample and Procedure

A stratified sampling approach by sector (education, healthcare, and finance) was used to ensure representation across the three service contexts. The target population comprised full-time employees with at least one year of tenure in their current organisation, ensuring adequate familiarity with organisational support practices and work routines. The survey was administered online and distributed through organisational gatekeepers and professional networks. A total of 300 usable responses were retained for analysis.

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

Job autonomy was measured using a scale capturing the degree of freedom, independence, and discretion employees have in carrying out their work tasks, consistent with established job design research (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Recent empirical studies in organisational settings have continued to adopt and validate this conceptualisation of autonomy (e.g., Parker et al., 2001).

Ethical Behaviour

Ethical behaviour was assessed using a six-item scale adapted from prior organisational ethics research capturing norm-consistent employee behaviour (Mayer et al., 2012), with item wording customised to typical workplace contexts (Edú-Valsania et al., 2023).

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 distribution 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 assessed to assess 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×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×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, supporting the moderation hypothesis.

Descriptive and Reliability Analysis

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients for the study variables.

Perceived organizational support showed a mean of 3.85 (SD = 0.62), job autonomy had a mean of 3.72 (SD = 0.58), and ethical behaviour had the highest mean at 4.10 (SD = 0.55). All constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Hair et al., 2019).

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlations among the main variables are reported in Table 2. POS was positively correlated with ethical behaviour (r = .52, p < .01). Job autonomy was also positively correlated with ethical behaviour (r = .40, p < .01) and with POS (r = .45, p < .01), indicating that supportive climates and discretion tend to co-occur and are jointly associated with ethical conduct.

Hypothesis Testing via Regression Analysis

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses. In Model 1, perceived organizational support significantly predicted ethical behaviour (β = .52, p < .001), supporting H1. In Model 2, job autonomy was added and showed a significant positive effect (β = .29, p < .01), while POS remained significant (β = .44, p < .001). Model 3 included the interaction term (POS × Job Autonomy), which was significant (β = .29, p < .01), indicating a moderation effect. Simple slope analysis revealed that the relationship between POS and ethical behaviour was stronger at higher levels of job autonomy, supporting H2.

Discussion

The findings indicate that POS is positively associated with ethical behaviour and that job autonomy is an important boundary condition. Consistent with Organizational Support Theory, employees who perceive higher organizational support are more likely to reciprocate through value-consistent and norm-congruent conduct (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The significant interaction suggests that supportive climates translate into ethical action most strongly when employees have discretion over work methods and decisions. From a self-determination perspective, autonomy facilitates internalisation and self-regulation, enabling supported employees to act in accordance with ethical standards rather than merely comply with external demands (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). In Malaysia's governance-intensive service sectors, aligning supportive practices with autonomy-enhancing job design may therefore strengthen day-to-day ethical decisions in accordance with MCCG and Bursa sustainability expectations (Securities Commission Malaysia, 2021; Bursa Malaysia, 2022).

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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