

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JOB CHARACTERISTICS AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 virus leading to the pandemic has highly impacted many sectors, including the business sector. The pandemic and all forms of movement control orders by the authorities affecting low employee performance affect the Malaysian economy significantly. Therefore, this study examines the possible factors leading to high employee performance within SMEs. They are critical to work future, not only for creating jobs and developing the economy but also for driving market competition and innovation. The study's respondents consist of employees in the SME sector. This study employs a quantitative method. A set of questionnaires was distributed to 287 respondents. This study used AMOS's Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to analyse the data. The study's findings indicate that job characteristics and conflict management styles are significantly associated with employee performance. Moreover, conflict management styles mediate the relationship between job characteristics and employee performance. In this study, employee performance is essential to every organisation and helps increase productivity and improve customer service quality.

Keywords: Conflict management styles, employee performance, job characteristics, SMEs

Submission: 5th December 2022

Accepted: 21st June 2023

<https://doi.org/10.33736/ijbs.5965.2023>

1. INTRODUCTION

The service sector is the Malaysian largest small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) segment, accounting for over 90% of the country's total establishments. The country has over 700,000 service sector enterprises (SME Corporation Malaysia, 2019). The Malaysian SMEs' gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by 7.3%, faster than the decline in the non-SMEs and the country's GDP in 2020, which decreased by 4.6% and 5.6%, respectively. The SMEs are in various

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sectors, such as manufacturing, construction, agriculture, mining, and quarrying (SME Corporation Malaysia, 2019). Malaysia is one of the nations in Southeast Asia comprising various SMEs. These organisations are vital in economic development and have contributed significantly to the country's GDP. As the country's backbone, they comprise 98.5% of all businesses and employ almost two-thirds of the workforce (SME Corporation Malaysia, 2019).

The COVID-19 outbreak has created a global health crisis (Hamid et al., 2020). It has also affected Malaysian SMEs' performance and has seriously impacted the country's economy since January 2020 (Tajudin et al., 2021). According to Che Omar et al. (2020), the pandemic has been regarded as global health and economic disruption. Besides, the seriousness of COVID-19 has aggravated the economic condition, which is substantially higher than in the 2008 recession (Ismail, 2022).

Due to its unique nature, little is known about how the virus affects organisations. The Malaysian government issued a movement control order (MCO) on March 18, 2020, to avoid the virus spread by adopting "social distancing." Many SMEs in Malaysia are struggling to survive due to the COVID-19 crisis. Although the situation affected larger and smaller organisations, recent studies indicated that the crisis impacts SMEs more than larger corporations (Balla-Elliott et al., 2020). In March 2020, over 50,000 SMEs were forced to close their doors due to the MCO implementation (Mustapa & Mohamad, 2021). This situation has negatively affected the Malaysian economy, deserving research (Aziz et al., 2020; Singh & Hanafi, 2020).

SMEs are the major economic contributors to Malaysia; thus, low employee performance (e.g., due to the pandemic and all forms of MCOs by the authorities) significantly affects the Malaysian economy (Ahmad Rafliis et al., 2020). However, one significant problem Malaysian SMEs face is often related to low employee productivity. It is because SMEs still indicate relatively low levels of technology adoption and digital transformation; thus, SMEs have fewer resources than larger businesses (The Malaysian Reserve, 2022). It also triggers the need to explore ways to improve their performance as it helps to reform Malaysian SMEs (Yusof et al., 2019).

Employee performance is essential to every organisation. Improving employee performance helps boost productivity and is critical to organisational success. It helps increase productivity and improve customer service quality (Gilboa et al., 2008). High-performing employees enable organisations to compete locally and globally (Mohamad Hajari, 2020). From the employees' perspective, their performance can be measured through their task outcomes and ability to perform tasks efficiently and adequately. Increasing employee performance is critical in dealing with economic problems due to COVID-19 (Muttaqin et al., 2020).

The employees should have high capabilities to maintain survival attempts amid such unpredictable conditions and, at the same time, maintain the organisation's competitive advantage. Before that, the employees should find relevant strategic ways and ensure that the implementation consistently increases workplace performance. Employees determine how the organisation operates its business and growth (So et al., 2018). Thus, employee performance strongly influences the organisation's success (Tamara et al., 2020). Therefore, examining the possible critical factors leading to high employee performance within SMEs is essential. Thus, this study aims to identify job characteristics and conflict management influencing employee performance, and conflict management is a mediator in the relation between job characteristics and employee performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Job Characteristics*

Hackman and Oldham (1976) described the relationship between individual responses to work and job characteristics through their proposed job characteristics model. They proposed the conditions in which employees become internally motivated to perform their jobs effectively. They posited that three variables interact in this model: (1) employee psychological state, (2) job characteristics, and (3) employee attributes. The job characteristics model emphasises the importance of work redesign as a strategy to improve productivity, quality, efficiency, and effectiveness (Luckhaupt et al., 2017; Park et al., 2020). The model theoretically specifies how employees become motivated to perform their jobs effectively and efficiently.

2.2. *Employee Performance*

Bataineh (2017) defined that employee performance mixes employees' everyday activities with efficiency and effectiveness in meeting stakeholders' expectations. Meanwhile, Whetten & Cameron (2015) defined employee performance as an outcome of personal competence arising from one being motivated. Performance is also the effect of individual competence and environmental factors embedded in the organisation's working conditions. According to Putri et al. (2019), employee performance is related to the quality and quantity of work done and ability to complete assigned tasks promptly and efficiently. This is also in line with Anita et al. (2020), where employees who have high employee performance will always be able to complete their work well, as they can fulfil their responsibilities stated in their job description and perform any activities that directly have an impact on the performance of their organisation as a whole.

2.3. *Conflict Management*

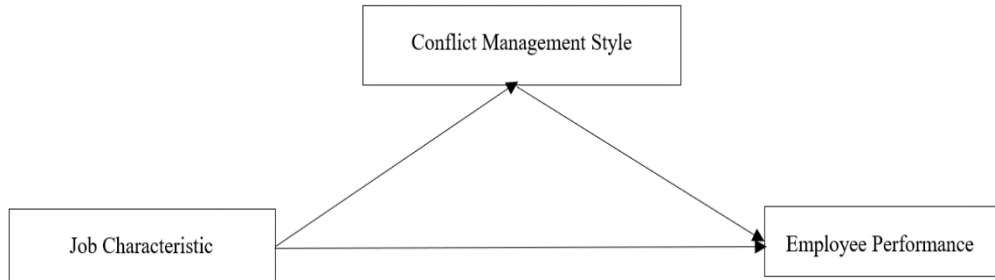
Putnam and Poole (1987) described the conflict as "the interaction of interdependent people who receive the opposition of objective, aims, and perhaps ideals and who regard the other party as potentially interfering with the accomplishment of these goals". "Conflict management" is the technique for resolving disputes and how these depend on various personality traits (Reich et al., 2007). When faced with conflict, people typically select one of five actions: avoiding it, accommodating it, competing in it, compromising it, or cooperating (Khanaki & Hassanzadeh, 2010).

2.4. *The Framework of the Study*

The framework (Figure 1) is an integration of job characteristics theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), conflict management styles theory (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979), and employee performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). It describes the factors of job characteristics concerning employee performance with the effects of conflict management styles' role among SME employees. The job characteristics posit that employees experience positive effects to the degree that they learn to acquire knowledge, have experienced responsibility, and perform tasks they care about excellently. If conflict is appropriately handled, it can stimulate innovation, creativity, growth, better decision-making, and increase employee performance (Rahim, 2017). Job characteristics can influence

employee performance within SMEs. Meanwhile, conflict management styles mediate the relationship between personality traits, job characteristics, and employee performance.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



2.5. Hypothesis Development

2.5.1. Job Characteristics and Employee Performance

Previous studies revealed a favourable and significant relationship between job characteristics and employee performance, either directly or indirectly. Several studies have also shown that these factors directly impact employee performance (Evelyne et al., 2018; Grobelna, 2019). Fitriani et al. (2021) examined job characteristics' influence on employee performance. Moreover, a study by Johari et al. (2019) revealed that job characteristics influence employee performance. Jobs providing adequate feedback would enable the employee to function well, resulting in better performance. Besides, improving employee performance requires more attention to job descriptions matching their role, which can increase employee performance. Employees may believe their work to have great personal value and feel challenged or stretched in their abilities, leading to improved performance. Thus, job characteristics can influence employee performance. The following hypotheses are based on various studies on the link between employee performance and job characteristics.

H1: Job characteristics are associated with employee performance.

2.5.2. Job Characteristics and Conflict Management Styles

According to Milton et al. (2015), job characteristics (e.g., feedback and autonomy) positively affect conflict management styles. They revealed that compromising, dominating, and integrating conflict management styles link with job characteristics substantially. This study is supported by Mariappan (2013), stating that feedback can positively impact conflict resolution by providing employees with a better understanding of how they perform their duties. It can lead them to adopt a more collaborative approach to resolving disagreements. The significance of a task is revealed when it has an actual purpose and impacts the individuals performing it (Hackman & Oldham (1975). Rahim (2002) explained that obliging styles are designed to minimise differences and emphasise people's commonalities. The literature also supports the concept of accommodating people. According to this hypothesis, accommodating individuals tend to ignore their interests in helping others.

H2: Job characteristics are associated with conflict management styles.

2.5.3. Conflict Management Styles and Employee Performance

Conflict management techniques reduce employee performance and should be avoided (Aoun et al., 2020). Following Montes et al. (2012), the technique sustains a favourable relationship between the management and staff, fostering employee performance, primarily when it is successful and advantageous. When resolving a problem is advantageous to both parties, the integrated conflict management styles enhance job performance. Conflicting parties are urged to exchange information to meet their needs (Alzawahreh, 2011). According to Rahim (2001), conflict resolution can motivate people to work harder to reach their goals. He also noted that issue resolution using less avoiding and more integrating styles could positively affect job performance. Reio and Trudel (2013) analysed the relationship between conflict management styles and employee performance. Their findings revealed that uncivil behaviour was regularly witnessed and initiated at work. Implementing an integrative conflict resolution technique was associated with employee performance. Consequently, the following theory is consistent with the body of existing literature:

H3: Conflict management styles are associated with employee performance.

2.5.4. The Conflict Management Styles' Mediating Role

Moberg (2001) defined conflict management styles as specific behavioural patterns displayed during a conflict. An earlier study classified conflict management styles as avoiding, compromising, dominating, integrating, and obliging (Chen et al., 2019). Aoun et al. (2020) discovered that conflict management styles are positively associated with employee performance. Min et al. (2020) indicated that conflict could become productive if the style employed to address the conflict is critical in determining successful conflict management styles. The study by Ayub et al. (2017) revealed that people with agreeable personalities are more likely to see less conflict, while those with an extroverted mindset are more prone to engaging in compromising behaviour and avoiding strategies. On the other hand, those with neurotic tendencies prefer the dominant style. According to Meyer (2004), an integrating style can improve employee performance by allowing both parties to benefit from the solution. A study by Aqqad et al. (2019) showed that conflict management mediates employee performance. As such, this study hypothesises that:

H4: Conflict Management styles mediate the association between job characteristics with employee performance.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study's population is the service sector employees, one of the operating SMEs in Malaysia. Three types of SMEs are micro, small, and medium. However, this study focused only on micro-enterprises, the largest type, with 693,670 establishments among SMEs in Malaysia (SME Corporation Malaysia, 2019). This study employed a stratified sampling design, a probability

sampling that can be sampled from the SME service sector employees' list. This study used IBM SPSS Version 26 and IBM AMOS Version 26. The employee performance measurement (13 items) was adopted from Koopman et al. (2014), comprising contextual and task performance. Meanwhile, the job characteristics measurement (five dimensions) was adopted from Hackman and Oldham (1974), comprising autonomy, feedback, skill variety, task identity, and task significance. This study used 23 items to evaluate the job characteristics' construct. Lastly, the conflict management styles measurement comprised five dimensions: accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, competing, and compromising. This study also employed Rahim Conflict Inventory-II, or ROC-II, to measure the employees' conflict management styles among SMEs. Rahim (1983) developed the ROC-II, consisting of a 28-item inventory measuring how an employee handles his/her conflict. Furthermore, this study adopted the study by Gunkel et al. (2016).

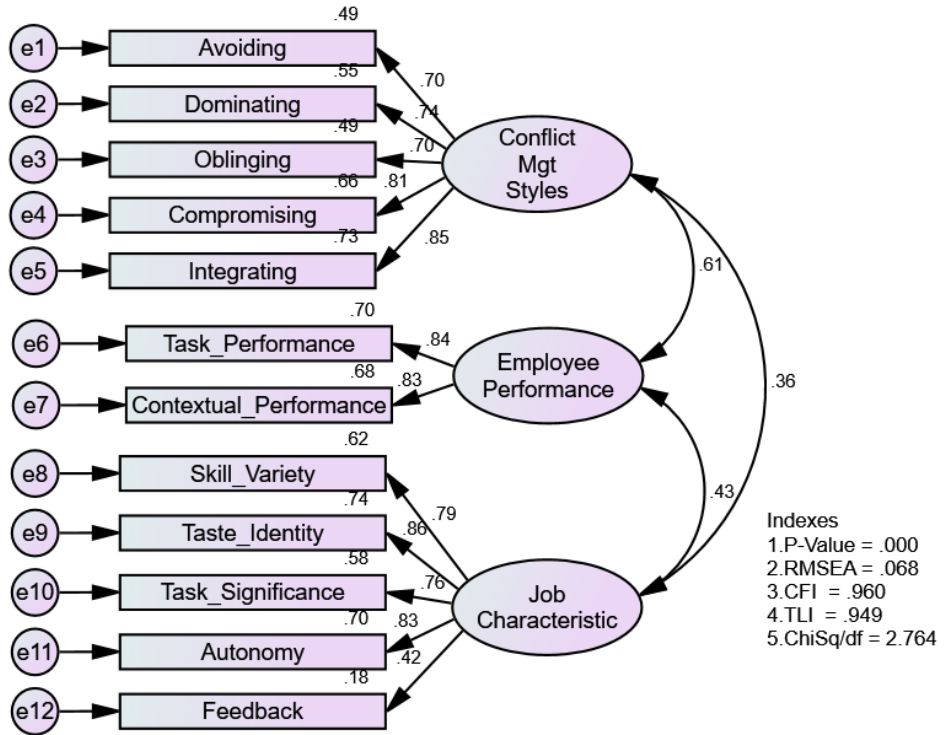
4. RESULT

This study aims to follow the structural equation modelling's two-step structure proposed by Awang (2014, 2015) and Awang et al. (2018).

- i. The measurement model reliability and validity used in various applications are validated through the Pooled Confirmed Factor Analysis (CFA). This procedure is performed to ensure the model is correct and reliable.
- ii. The structural model is developed after the completion of the Pooled CFA. The model is then subjected to a structural equation modelling procedure, testing the hypothesis about inter-relationships between constructs.

The study chose to perform the structural equation modelling procedure known as the Pooled-CFA method at once for all the constructs to validate the study's results. The constructs were linked to a double-headed arrow to measure their relationship strengths. The procedure for implementing the Pooled-Measurement Model is shown in Figure 2. Before starting the structural model modelling process, the researcher must prove the constructs' reliability and validity. The model's validity was then evaluated for convergent, discriminant, and construct validity (Awang et al., 2018). The two-step structure of the study involved evaluating the constructs, convergent, and discriminant validity. The first step was to establish a set of fitness indexes that would be used to measure the model's validity (Mahfouz et al., 2020). Figure 2 shows that the construct validity met the threshold values assessed using the set of Fitness Indexes. The Root Mean Square of Error Approximation (RMSEA) achieved a threshold value of less than 0.10, 0.068, assessed using the Absolute Fit Index. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) achieved a threshold value exceeding 0.85, 0.960, assessed using the Incremental Fit Index. The ratio of χ^2/df achieved the threshold value of less than 5.0, 2.764, assessed using the Parsimonious Fit Index. Thus, the latent constructs' measurement model in Figure 2 achieved the construct validity requirement (Awang, 2015; Awang et al., 2018; Afthanorhan et al., 2019).

Figure 2: Pooled CFA



The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is required to assess convergent validity. The construct achieves convergent validity if the AVE value exceeds the threshold value of 0.5 (Afthanorhan et al., 2018, 2019). The composite reliability (CR) value must be greater than the threshold value of 0.6 to achieve its reliability (Mohd Azli et al., 2017). Concerning AVE and CR values in Table 1, all AVE and CR values are greater than their threshold values of 0.5 and 0.6, respectively (Asnawi et al., 2019). In sum, all latent constructs in the model achieved their composite reliability and convergent validity.

Table 1: Composite Reliability and Convergent Validity Analysis

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Conflict Management Styles	Avoiding	.70	.875	.585
	Dominating	.74		
	Obliging	.70		
	Compromising	.81		
	Integrating	.85		
Employee Performance	Task Performance	.83	.816	.689
	Contextual Performance	.84		
Job Characteristics	Skill Variety	.79	.885	.608
	Taste Identity	.86		
	Task Significance	.76		

Autonomy	.83
Feedback	.42

The type of validity the study needs to investigate is discriminant validity. It is to ensure that the model does not have redundant constructs. Redundant constructs occur when multiple pairs of highly correlated constructs occur. The study should generate the constructs' discriminant validity index summary, computed by considering their AVEs' square root concerning other constructs in the model. Based on Table 2, the constructs achieved their discriminant validity if their AVEs' square root is greater than their correlation values with other model's constructs (Awang, 2015).

Table 2: Discriminant Validity Index Summary

Construct	Conflict Management Styles	Employee Performance	Job Characteristics
Conflict Management Styles	.765		
Employee Performance	.608	.830	
Job Characteristics	.363	.431	.780

The structural model is organised from left to right. The exogenous constructs, constructs, and endogenous constructs are placed on the left, centre, and right (Awang, 2015; Awang et al., 2018). Figure 3 shows that the exogenous constructs are connected to their respective endogenous constructs using the single-headed arrow following the hypothesis direction.

Figure 3: Structural Model

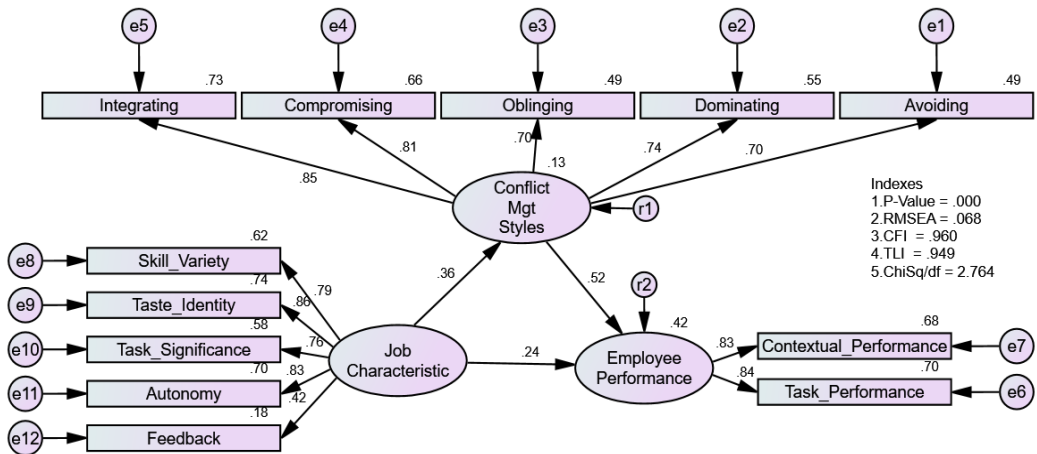


Table 3 shows significant H1, H2, and H3 paths. Conflict management styles are the most dominant factor influencing employee performance, with an indicator value of Beta ($\beta=.460$). Thus, the researcher analyses the mediator effect to answer the H4 in the following sections.

Table 3: Hypotheses Testing Analysis

		Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
H1: Employee Performance	← Job Characteristics	.299	.069	4.301	.000	Significant
H2: Conflict Management Styles	← Job Characteristics	.507	.082	6.204	.000	Significant
H3: Employee Performance	← Conflict Management Styles	.460	.054	8.480	.000	Significant

4.1. Mediation Analysis

This study reconfirmed the mediation test results using 1000 bootstrap samples with bias-corrected confidence and percentile confidence intervals of 95%, respectively. Table 4 shows that conflict management styles mediate the association between job characteristics with employee performance.

Table 4: The Bootstrapping Procedure Confirming Mediation Test Results

	Indirect Effect	Direct Effect
Bootstrapping Results	0.235	0.300
Bootstrapping <i>p</i> -Values Results	0.002	0.002
	Significant	Significant
Mediation Type	The direct effect is significant; thus, it is a Partial Mediation.	

4.2. Discussion

This study examines the association between job characteristics with employee performance, with conflict management styles mediating the association. Hypothesis H1 suggests that job characteristics are directly associated with employee performance, and the study's findings support it. The findings are consistent with Evelyne et al. (2018), Grobelna (2019), Johari et al. (2019), Hussein (2020), and Johari and Yahya (2016). Employees' job characteristics in SMEs significantly influence their performance. This study reveals that raising employee job characteristics is as effective as improving their performance since employees' job descriptions and work methods correspond to their positions. Moreover, the employees believe that their jobs allow them to use various skill sets, impact others' lives, finish a full project, and be free to make decisions linked to their jobs. Bethel (2022) noted that various tasks require varying talents and abilities. A job gives employees the autonomy to carry out their duties and to plan their actions. This concept also helps increase their sense of responsibility (Johari & Yahya, 2016). Feedback regarding the way they carry out their jobs should be given to employees to improve their performance. It should also include the sequence of tasks and the chances of them participating in decisions.

Hypothesis H2 suggests that job characteristics are directly associated with conflict management styles, and the study's findings support it. The findings are consistent with Milton et al. (2015) and Mariappan (2013), indicating that job characteristics positively correlate with conflict management styles when the employees are advised to perform their duties and tasks. Having job characteristics helps employees feel valued and motivated to work harder. It also helps them resolve disputes through cooperative methods. In addition, it improves their performance and prevents conflict from

developing. Rather than settling disputes or preventing them from happening in the first place, conflict resolution is about creating effective approaches to increase the conflict beneficial aspects and lessen the dysfunctional elements. This process helps employees improve their productivity and learning.

Hypothesis H3 suggests that conflict management styles are directly associated with employee performance, and the study's findings support it. The findings are consistent with Aoun et al. (2020). Employees should be transparent about their goals and resources to make informed decisions regarding the organisation's objectives. Some believe that confrontations are more aggressive than others due to the motivation behind them. This type of conflict resolution is believed to be more effective and widespread. According to Kalogiannidis (2020), the approach is used to preserve a positive relationship between management and staff, encouraging excellent employee performance, especially when the approach is successful and advantageous. This study indicates that managing conflict at work requires high self- and other care. The exchange of ideas is encouraged, and disputes are minimised to find a workable solution for all parties. The integrated approach focuses on cooperative problem-solving (O'Dwyer & Gilmore, 2019). When managers or organisations adopt this approach, they deal with conflict head-on and develop innovative, constructive solutions. They do this by showing more regard for their and the workforce's needs (Longe, 2015).

Hypothesis H4 suggests that conflict management styles mediate the association between job characteristics with employee performance, and the study's findings support it. The finding is consistent with Aqqad et al.'s study (2019). This study showed that the employee understands the value of managing conflict in organisations, given how important it is to a company's long-term viability and success. Conflict can significantly improve performance by fostering critical review, which can strengthen the concept of purposeful criticism, offer alternate ideas, and lessen the problems of groupthink (Zhang et al., 2015). Conflict may become constructive if the approach taken to resolve the conflict is essential in identifying effective conflict management methods (Min et al., 2020). Therefore, the individual must have the essential skills to handle disagreements emerging at work to decide which style suits the argument or conflict the best. As a result, individuals can choose the conflict management style that works best for them. This study also found that SME employees should make every effort to promote and enable job characteristics to enhance their job performance, which would eventually provide favourable outcomes for the SMEs as a whole.

5. CONCLUSION

This study found empirical evidence for relationships posited in the research framework. Using the individual constructs involved in this study, the present findings contribute to literature and theory development, including (1) establishing the positive influence of job characteristics and employee performance, (2) establishing the positive influence of job characteristics and conflict management styles, (3) establishing the positive influence of conflict management styles and employee performance, (4) establishing the mediating influence of conflict management styles in the association between job characteristics with employee performance, and (5) expanding the trait activation, job characteristics, and conflict management styles theories.

Moreover, the study's findings contribute several practical implications regarding employee performance in the Malaysian SMEs context. The findings are relevant to policymakers, such as the SME Corporation Malaysia, to design policies and programmes related to the SME sector. The study's findings benefit practitioners in understanding and presenting adequate indication for confirming a significant association between the variables (job characteristics, conflict management styles, and employee performance). Regulatory bodies and management of SMEs are provided with recommendations to understand the implication of their commitment to design holistic conflict management styles that will enhance employee performance since the practical recommendation was drawn logically from the statistical findings. Consequently, this study provides empirical evidence that job characteristics and conflict management styles are significantly associated with employee performance. It shows that regulatory authorities and management of SMEs should be more concerned with designing procedures and approaches that will minimise the problems of job characteristics and conflict management styles and improve employee performance.

This study was limited to analysing SME employees. Future research should consider other sectors, such as healthcare, transportation, construction, and manufacturing. This study used a quantitative method instead of a qualitative method. It only utilised a questionnaire as the only tool for data gathering. Unfortunately, the respondents might not be able to answer the questions correctly. The results might not accurately reflect the study's overall findings. The study also used a cross-sectional design to collect the respondents' opinions at a specific time. It is hoped that future studies will combine qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate employee performance in Malaysian SMEs. Due to the nature of the study, it did not allow the population to make causal inferences. Furthermore, the data were collected once; thus, it might not be possible to interpret the findings in terms of the long-term behaviours of Malaysian SMEs. Future studies should employ a longitudinal design to validate the findings. A longitudinal study beyond the current study's scope may offer robust findings to make causal inferences.

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