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Toxic Positivity and Its Role among Young Adult Workers

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic-fuelled rise of the "Good vibes only" has raised concerns about toxic positivity, fostering unrealistic expectations of constant happiness. This qualitative study explored the role of toxic positivity among young adult workers in Malaysia. Six Malaysian participants, aged 18 to 25 years old, were purposefully selected for a semi-structured interview to explore the challenges, risk factors, and coping strategies related to toxic positivity encounters. Three themes and seven subthemes were identified using Thematic Analysis. The study findings underscored the importance of recognising toxic positivity as a critical issue that affects the emotional well-being of young adult workers. Future research is recommended to explore similar themes in different study contexts, incorporating multiple perspectives to gain deeper insight into the issue.

Keywords: toxic positivity, challenges, risk factors, coping strategies, young adult workers

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1 INTRODUCTION

Positive psychology is a psychological discipline that introduces a novel perspective on the human experience by shifting society's focus from stress, disorder, and dysfunction toward well-being, health, and optimal functioning (Seligman, 2019). This perspective has significantly impacted mental health by encouraging positive emotions and fostering crucial psychological characteristics such as resilience, optimism, and mindfulness, essential for overall well-being and coping with life's obstacles (Hartanto et al., 2022). Despite the constructive intentions behind positive psychology, there is a growing recognition that toxic positivity can be a trap when someone focuses too much on positivity (Javier, 2021).

Toxic positivity, known as the over-promotion of happiness (Jindal et al., 2022), involves the belief that one should maintain a positive outlook in response to whatever happens (Quinto et al., 2021). The idea has led to the expectation that individuals should ignore their negative emotions, even in adversity. According to Jindal et al. (2022), toxic positivity can manifest externally by urging others only to acknowledge positivity and suppress negative emotions or internally when we project ourselves a façade of happiness while ignoring realistic concerns. Consequently, suppressing negative emotions causes stress that is detrimental to mental health (Feltner, 2023) and hinders our ability to navigate various emotions, including negative ones (Quinto et al., 2021).

In a 2020 survey conducted by the University of Chicago (Edwards, 2022), 67.8% of respondents reported experiencing toxic positivity, showing how pervasive the toxic positivity issue affects us today. However, the toxic positivity concept is still relatively unfamiliar to contemporary society (Kojongian & Wibowo, 2021), especially in a collectivistic country that often adheres to the group notion that happiness can be achieved exclusively by focusing on positive aspects (Quinto et al., 2021). Since Malaysia is a collectivistic nation with distinct cultural characteristics, it is essential to call for a dedicated investigation. This study explored the prevalence of toxic positivity in a target population within the Malaysian cultural context. Acknowledging toxic positivity as a problematic emotion management strategy (Edwards, 2022), this research aims to advance the development of culturally sensitive interventions to promote emotional well-being in the multi-racial nation of Malaysia.

For instance, an extensive body of research (Elkfrawy & Ibrahim, 2021) has emphasised the significance of maintaining a positive outlook. Nevertheless, this understanding of positivity is at odds with negative emotions being an inherent aspect of the human experience. While mental health researchers (Feltner, 2023) have uncovered the potential detrimental toxic positivity effects on mental health, there is still an ongoing debate surrounding the concept (Travers, 2021; Davis, 2022). Some argue that the term has been overused and can undermine an individual's resilience by encouraging pessimism. This underscores the protracted recognition of the detrimental consequences of excessive optimism, implying that toxic positivity may have pervasively

prevailed in our culture without acknowledgement (Novita, 2020). Additionally, the lack of emphasis on a qualitative approach (Pangestu et al., 2022) to studying toxic positivity has resulted in a lack of nuanced findings that could contribute to the discourse. Thus, this qualitative study aims to gain profound insights into the issue of toxic positivity through the lens of individual experience.

Collectively, toxic positivity is a lesser-known concept that has spread rapidly during the Covid-19 pandemic. It received limited attention in empirical research, and a comprehensive examination of toxic positivity's pervasive influence on our daily lives is warranted. Although prior studies have primarily focused on its effects on mental health outcomes (Quinto et al., 2021), its impact during the Covid-19 pandemic (Wibowo, 2020), and its correlation with personality traits (Jindal et al., 2022), there is a need for a more thorough investigation into its broader implications. This study aims to address this research gap by providing valuable data that contributes to a deeper understanding of toxic positivity and its diverse roles within the target population.

The prevalence of toxic positivity is a widespread issue that affects individuals in various contexts, including at home and online. This phenomenon affects people of all ages, from children to adults. While recent research (Castro et al., 2021) has found widespread toxic positivity impacts in the workplace, explicitly affecting laid-off young adult workers, there is currently a lack of research addressing strategies to help workers cope with toxic positivity. Given that "Gen Z" individuals, defined as those under the age of 26, make up 30% of the global population and are projected to constitute 27% of the workforce by 2025 (Koop, 2021, as cited in American Psychiatric Association, n.d.), it is crucial to address the toxic positivity among young adult in the workplace. By considering the findings, organisations can develop a deeper understanding of the impact of toxic positivity on young adult workers and its influence on their lives.

Young adult workers exhibit the highest prevalence of mental illnesses in Malaysia (Lee et al., 2023) and are particularly vulnerable to sources of toxic positivity (American Psychiatric Association, n.d.). Therefore, it is essential to explore the role of toxic positivity within this specific group in terms of risk factors, challenges, and coping strategies. The study answered the following research questions: (1) What challenges do young adult workers face in dealing with toxic positivity? (2) What are the risk factors of toxic positivity among young adult workers? (3) How do young adult workers cope with toxic positivity?

1.1 Theoretical Framework

1.1.1 Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

According to Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), human behaviour is a multifaceted outcome of personal factors, environmental context, and behaviour itself. This theory was applied

in the current study to elucidate the risk factors associated with individuals falling into toxic positivity. For instance, consider an individual who has been instructed from an early age to maintain an upbeat attitude under all circumstances. This belief is amplified by his surroundings, where family ceaselessly promotes the idea that positive vibes are the key to happiness. The individual internalises this belief and exhibits toxic positivity, constantly putting on a happy face and suppressing any negative emotions he experiences. In this example, a person's behaviour is influenced by his cognitive processes (belief in the importance of positivity) and external resources (environment). Simultaneously, a person's behaviour also affects his cognitive processes and social environment, as his consistent toxic positivity display further reinforces his belief in the importance of positivity and may influence others to do the same. In summary, reciprocal determinism, which refers to the interrelation of behaviour, cognition, and the environment, can help explain how various risk factors interact to promote the development of toxic positivity.

1.1.2 Rational Emotional Behavioural Therapy (REBT)

This study utilised REBT to gain insights into toxic positivity, which researchers widely regard as an irrational belief that contributes to psychological disturbance. Toxic positivity is an absolute demand for positivity, such as "I must be positive" or "I should not be negative." This can be considered an irrational expectation for positivity, disregarding the natural range of human emotions and experiences. When these dogmatic commands to feel positive are directed inwardly, individuals may condemn themselves to feel bad during challenging times, such as "But I do feel bad, so there must be something wrong with me!" This exemplifies the REBT model, in which a person's irrational beliefs cause the individual to experience unhealthy emotions. REBT therapists challenge these irrational beliefs by guiding individuals to acknowledge that unhappiness is a natural part of the human experience.

2 METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological qualitative design (Lazarsfeld, 1972) to explore the lived experiences of young adult workers with toxic positivity. This method involved collecting and analysing in-depth participant data through interviews and other qualitative techniques. The interpretative nature of qualitative research introduces a potential bias, as the researcher's beliefs can influence data analysis and findings. To address this issue, all (6) participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript, ensuring the validity of the data.

2.2 Sampling Procedure

This study employed purposive sampling (Creswell, 1998) to recruit the right participants to collect valid data about their experiences with toxic positivity. The IDRlabs 3-Minute Toxic Positivity Test (IDR-3MTPT) by Quintero and Long (2019) was used as a pre-survey to recruit participants for semi-structured interviews. The researcher shared information about the research on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp stories and sent a pre-survey Google form to 36 individuals who expressed interest and met the following inclusion criteria: (1) aged between 18 and 25 years, (2) Malaysian, and (3) demonstrated a strong willingness to participate in the study. Of the 36 individuals, 28 scored seven (7) or higher on the IDR-3MTPT and were eligible for the interview. However, the researcher only contacted the six (6) highest-scoring participants (scoring 10 points) from the pre-survey to ask for an interview.

2.3 Participants

According to Creswell (1998), the ideal sample size for phenomenological studies is between 5 and 25 participants. This study interviewed six (6) young adult workers using a semi-structured approach. The participants' demographic information is presented in a table.

Table 1. Demographic data of participants.

No/ Name	Age	Gender	Race	Origin	Education	Marital Status	Occupation
1. TSY	18	Male	Chinese	Sibu	Form Five	Single	Grocery Staff
2. CCPM	21	Female	Chinese	Kuching	Foundation	Single	Part-time pharmacy staff
3. LUZ	21	Male	Chinese	Pahang	Foundation	Single	Primary School Teacher
4. AAD	23	Female	*Kayan* + *Melanau*	Miri	Bachelor's Degree	Single	Admission Assistant
5. SE	24	Female	*Iban*	Selangor	Bachelor's Degree	Single	Accountant Assistant
6. HAH	25	Female	Malay	Johor	Bachelor's Degree	Single	Special Education Tutor

* Pseudonyms have been used to refer to all participants to ensure confidentiality.

2.4 Instrumentation

2.4.1 Pre-survey: IDRlabs 3-Minute Toxic Positivity Test

The IDRlabs 3-Minute Toxic Positivity Test (IDR-3MTPT) (Quintero & Long, 2019) was

implemented to identify toxic positivity symptoms in potential participants before conducting semi-structured interviews. It consisted of ten items posing common situational queries among individuals who exhibit toxic positivity. Participants used self-report responses to questions such as "I often feel guilty for feeling sad." Each question provided three response options—"Not me," "Describes me somewhat," and "Definitely Me"—enabling participants to assess how relevant each situation was to them. Although the test underwent statistical control and validation to guarantee reliability and validity, the researcher could not ascertain the exact Cronbach's alpha value. IDR-3MTPT provided a nuanced understanding of where they stand on the toxic-positivity spectrum, which can be a starting point for further exploration.

2.4.2 Semi-structured Interview: Interview Protocol

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to explore toxic positivity among young adult workers. The interview protocol was designed to guide the researcher in asking relevant questions that address the research questions (Creswell, 1998). One previous research by Quinto et al. (2021) was used as a reference to design and generate the interview protocol. The researcher then revised the interview questions in consultation with the third party to ensure they were highly compatible with the study's objectives. Participants were requested to describe their toxic positivity encounters using the following questions:

- Your IDR-3MTPT score indicates that you have experienced a toxic positive event. What do you think about your toxic positivity experience?
- Where do you see toxic positivity in your work/ personal life? How does it impact you?
- What do you see as the challenges in overcoming this toxic positivity encounter?
- How do you cope with toxic positivity?

2.5 Data Collection Procedure

The researcher created the IDR-3MTPT questionnaire using Google Forms and included captions for informed consent before sending it to the target population as a pre-survey. Based on the pre-survey results, the researcher considered 28 participants who scored seven or higher for semi-structured interviews. The number of participants in the study was limited to only six individuals with the highest pre-survey scores, as these participants demonstrated their willingness to participate after being contacted. The data collection process was discontinued once the researchers achieved data saturation. Following the consent process, the researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews with recordings to gather information from participants. Face-to-face interviews took place in Sibu, while participants residing at a distance were interviewed virtually using the Microsoft Teams platform. Each interview was limited to two hours to ensure the researcher's well-being while obtaining comprehensive information. Participants

were allowed to use their preferred language for comfort. The researcher transcribed the interview and involved the participants in verifying the transcriptions to ensure data accuracy.

2.6 Data Analysis

The data in this study were analysed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis method was used to assess whether the gathered data effectively addressed the research question posed. The thematic analysis process comprised seven key steps: (1) becoming familiar with the transcribed data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) identifying themes from the data, (4) reviewing the identified themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, (6) classifying the themes following a comprehensive review, and (7) producing the research report. The researcher employed this approach to identify emerging themes that represented the overall patterns of the participants' responses to the research objectives and questions.

3 RESULTS

The study identified three main themes and seven sub-themes in three main overarching areas through Thematic Analysis. The summary of key findings is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Themes, subthemes, and categories.

Themes	Sub-themes	Categories
Toxic positivity is genuine in Malaysia	Beneath the Surface: Unveiling Toxic Positivity	Belief Coping Strategies
	Toxic Positivity is Inexorable	Lack of Toxic Positivity Awareness Lack of Support System Religious Culture
Risk factors: No snowflake is innocent inan avalanche	Personality Factors	Perfectionism trait Introversion/ Extraversion trait Low Neuroticism
	Sociological Factors	Family Interaction Competitive Environment Social Norms Social Learning experiences

	Behavioural Factors	Positive Reinforcement Negative Reinforcement
Navigating a tightrope: Rebalancing amidst toxic positivity	Self-support	Self-Imposed Toxic Positivity Toxic Positivity from Others Toxic Positivity to Others
	External Support	Parents Teachers Government

3.1 Theme 1: Toxic positivity is genuine in Malaysia

The first theme aimed to bring attention to the pervasive issue of toxic positivity within Malaysian society, examining its presence in all aspects of life. Participants storied their own experiences with toxic positivity and shared the challenges they faced in addressing and reducing its influence.

3.1.1 Beneath the Surface: Unveiling Toxic Positivity

This sub-theme described the dynamic of toxic positivity among Malaysian participants who recounted personal anecdotes that illustrate toxic positivity infiltration across diverse life aspects.

Belief. During the interview, most participants highlighted the pervasive belief that maintaining optimism is paramount to actively negating natural negative feelings in various life situations. Expanding on this shared sentiment, they underscored that a positive outlook facilitates personal well-being and contributes significantly to navigating life's complexities.

> *"... Don't worry, just think positive! I'm sure it will all work out in the end. We just need to make sure we can stay optimistic." (LUZ)*

Some participants believed they could contribute to a more uplifting environment for those around them by advocating for a positive outlook. LUZ, SE, and AAD mentioned that they always inspire others and convince people to see challenges as opportunities for growth. AAD genuinely believes it is the only way to help others create a better future:

> *"...Why don't we ask them to focus on the positive things in life? I find that focusing on the good makes me feel better and more optimistic about the future…" (AAD)*

Coping Strategies. All the participants reported that they adopted an overly optimistic perspective to evade uncomfortable emotions. SE exemplified, "*People know emotional balance is important, but no one wants to go through pain*." This is consistent with the sharing of other participants in developing a coping mechanism of emphasising positivity to navigate life's challenges without being emotionally overwhelmed. As TSY explained,

> *"I will immediately focus on positive things to make me forget it, or... your body will be tired; even if you get a good night's sleep, you may wake up in muscle pain and tired."*

Collectively, the participants disclosed their daily stress management techniques, including "*focusing on positive quotes*" (TSY, CCPM), "*sleeping*" (CCPM, AAD), "*pretending happiness*" (LUZ, TSY, SE), and "*overlooking the issue*" (HAH, SE). These techniques provide temporary relief from crises but leave underlying problems unaddressed.

3.1.2 Toxic Positivity is Inexorable

Participants' narratives unveiled the challenges they faced in distancing themselves from toxic positivity habits despite their newfound awareness of its detrimental effects on their well-being.

Lack of Toxic Positivity Awareness. Most participants realised their lack of awareness of the toxic positivity concept when they shared a collective sentiment of unfamiliarity with the term, as they have constantly been instructed to focus solely on the positive. LUZ, in particular, expressed surprise when he first encountered the term "toxic positivity" and realised the harmful impact it had on him. Furthermore, there was notable resistance to embracing the concept among participants due to their difficulties in determining the harmfulness of toxic positivity. Two participants staunchly asserted their belief that:

> *"Positivity is the key to success and happiness. That is what I've always believed." (SE)*

> *"I've always been taught to look on the bright side, and it's served me well." (LUZ)*

However, only one participant, HAH, who has studied and worked in the mental health field, was able to explain the term "toxic positivity" well. She agreed that a lack of awareness of this concept "*is widespread in Malaysia, where reading is not heavily emphasised from a young age*."

Lack of Support System. Many participants experienced difficulties in breaking free from their toxic positivity behaviour due to the presence of an emotionally unsupportive environment. TSY, for instance, emphasised that his current surroundings do not provide a conducive space for nurturing emotional well-being. All participants always encounter individuals exhibiting toxic

positivity, whether it be from parents (SE, TSY), friends (CCPM, LUZ, AAD, TSY), or work colleagues (CCPM, SE, HAH). They all felt unsafe expressing their feelings, fearing that negativity could be frowned upon. Two participants further illustrated their experiences:

"I am expected to listen obediently, even if it made me uncomfortable." (CCPM)

"I never tell them how I feel as my feelings would not be well-received." (LUZ)

Religious belief. In this study, half of the participants acknowledged that their religious beliefs could pose a challenge in breaking free from toxic positivity. Specifically, they expressed the expectation placed on them to maintain a positive outlook and avoid negativity, which was primarily influenced by their religious beliefs. SE emphasised that she did not express dissatisfaction with her suffering, following the Christian belief that "*adversity is a test and part of the divine plan."* TSY also articulated how his religious beliefs guide him in coping with adverse experiences, stating, "*If I maintain a positive attitude when faced with hardship, that's a testament to my faith*." AAD held a divergent view that accentuating positivity is congruent with a biblical or Christ-honoring worldview. AAD claimed that *"Christianity acknowledges the existence of evil and encourages people to be vigilant."* However, HAH (Muslim) and LUZ (Buddhist) did not indicate being influenced by their religious beliefs, despite their religion also supporting a focus on positivity. Both asserted their autonomy in interpreting and applying their religious teachings. LUZ stressed, *"I believe we have the responsibility to select which aspects of our faith to prioritise and integrate into our lives."*

Culture. All participants concurred that Malaysia's collectivist culture, which places a high value on group harmony and cohesion, creates a sense of vulnerability when openly expressing negative emotions. All of them admitted to feigning happiness to maintain a positive atmosphere within their social circles. TSY mentioned, *"I didn't want to be the one to bring everyone down,"* he is expected to prioritise the group over personal desires. AAD and SE talked about their commitment to family loyalty, which causes them to comply with their parents' unreasonable positive demands without expressing their discomfort: *"I feel obligated to accept whatever they (parents) say as I am their daughter."* (SE)

3.2 Theme 2: Risk factors: No snowflake is innocent in an avalanche

All participants discussed the factors that increased their chances of experiencing toxic positivity issues. Their sharing emerged as a metaphor in which all snowflakes were not innocent in an avalanche, illustrating how multiple risk factors will accumulate to create a snowball effect that can lead to an avalanche - toxic positivity. In this study, participants' toxic positivity experiences were influenced by personality, sociological, and behavioural factors.

3.2.1 Personality Factors

Participants reached a consensus that their enduring traits or characteristics significantly influence their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, leading to the adoption of toxic positivity.

Perfectionism trait. All participants revealed that they always denied and suppressed difficult emotions due to their high standard to maintain an upbeat demeanour, expecting everything to be *"awesome all the time."* TSY said he fears admitting fatigue or stress, believing it reflects weakness. SE and CCPM have similar perspectives as TSY since they often tie their self-worth to accomplishments and external validation.

> *"I never dwell on my sadness. We need to always look forward." (CCPM)*

Some participants shared that they used toxic positivity as a motivation strategy to navigate the pressures they imposed on themselves. CCPM and HAH pushed themselves harder and kept projecting confidence to adhere to an idealised image of success.

> *"In the face of exhaustion or illness, I persisted in my studies, assuring myself that everything was under control." (HAH)*

LUZ started enforcing toxic positivity on those around him due to concerns about how other parties might perceive negativity or failure. LUZ expressed, *"I may have pondered why they opted for negativity..."* to affirm his behaviour.

Introversion/Extroversion trait. In this study, individuals who self-identified as introverts reported a heightened susceptibility to toxic positivity within society, leading to the internalisation of such experiences. Four participants received positive statements without overtly expressing their emotions or challenges. These experiences mirror their everyday challenges, with HAH noting, "*I am struggling to find someone with whom I can discuss my feelings…*" When recognising his friends' reactions, TSY ceased sharing his feelings, stating, "*it's not always necessary to share our matters with others as they may not be interested*." Most participants described themselves as attentive listeners rather than dominating the conversation by sharing their difficulties. AAD explained, "*I believe that everyone has difficulties, and I hope I can be the one who listens to them*." Only one self-described extrovert participant, LUZ, shared a distinct experience, mentioning that he was "*someone who likes to encourage people in his social circle*."

Low neuroticism. Some participants expressed their inherent inclination to experience fewer negative emotions. Two participants, SE, and LUZ, advocated for the expression of positivity to ensure seamless functioning even in challenging situations. LUZ emphasised maintaining a positive mindset as he reflected on his successes during a gruelling study week. SE echoed the

same sentiment, stating that "*prioritising positivity is important for preserving calmness to concentrate on tasks and goals without succumbing to stress*."

3.2.2 Sociological Factors

All participants uncovered the societal factors that contributed to the prevalence of toxic positivity.

Family Interaction. "... only positive expressions were acceptable in my family..." SE shared that she was raised in a family where negative emotions were seen as hindrances to success, making it challenging to discuss challenges openly. CCPM had a similar experience: *"...my parents avoided discussions about difficulties since my childhood, and I adopted similar patterns of prioritising positivity."* AAD mentioned she felt obligated to maintain a positive attitude due to the higher standards expected of her as the first-born child. However, HAH clarified that, as the eldest child, she did not feel the same pressure, saying, "*I am grateful I can decide what I wanted to do...*"

Competitive Environment. A few participants reflected on their school experiences, highlighting that a prevailing emphasis on success and positivity often overshadowed the recognition of challenges and negative emotions. Two participants expressed the pressure to maintain a positive outlook aligned with the prevailing success-oriented culture.

> *"…some classmates would mock my good grades with disdainful tones, prompting me to believe that I needed to work even harder to demonstrate success over them." (CCPM)*

Participants navigated toxic positivity in a competitive work environment to meet elevated expectations. CCPM exemplified proving herself without acknowledging her job security fears. Besides, the toxic workplace induces HAH's shame of being unable to maintain a positive outlook.

Additionally, two participants contributed their occupations to their toxic positivity experiences. Recalling her role in customer service, CCPM noted, "*After being a waitress, I learned to lower my boundaries.*" SE added, "*Even with challenging customers, we had to stay positive to address their issues."*

Social norms. "If I focus on filling in society's standards, I feel okay pushing myself until I meet their requirements or expectations." HAH and other participants further expounded on how societal expectations shape our attitudes towards negativity, with many sharing their experiences of avoiding such emotions for fear of being stigmatised. TSY added*, "I have noticed that people tend to label me as a downer when discussing challenges. It seems like there is an unwritten rule that we should only focus on the positive things."* The male participants also stressed gender expectations when taught to adopt a tough exterior.

Boys have to be strong...crying will make you feel weak... (TSY)

Social Learning Experiences. Each participant recounted their initial exposure to toxic positivity from the media or their immediate surroundings. LUZ characterised it as a "*cumulative process, gathering experiences from each person encountered or each book read."* TSY acknowledged replicating toxic positivity after observing a friend's apparent happiness and improved sleep. CCPM adopted a cheerful facade, noting that positivity garnered social approval and acceptance within her group. Some participants noted exposure to happiness messages and success on social media, with CCPM explaining that certain celebrities perpetuate this trend. The increased exposure to such messages occurred, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. TSY mentioned developing a habit of watching online videos while spending more time at home during the pandemic. Conversely, two participants asserted their resilience to the influence of toxic positivity information provided by mass media. HAH emphasised, *"Regardless of their opinions, we must remain steadfast in our beliefs..."*

3.2.3 Behavioural Factors

Behavioural factors can play a significant role in developing toxic positivity among participants.

Positive Reinforcement. All participants indicated a willingness to adopt toxic positivity behaviour if it facilitated achieving desired outcomes. Despite the discomfort, SE used positivity to gain recognition from her parents and prove her worthiness. TSY continued employing toxic positivity *"to maintain a positive image"* within his friend group. Additionally, HAH, CCPM and AAD relied on toxic positivity as a strategy to encourage them to work hard to secure rewards for outstanding exam results. Conversely, LUZ utilised toxic positivity to cultivate a positive mindset, seeing himself as an optimistic person capable of embracing emotions.

Negative Reinforcement. Participants demonstrated an inclination towards practising toxic positivity in the face of unfavourable outcomes resulting from the expression of negative emotions. Consequently, they suppressed their negative emotions to avoid experiencing discomfort or potential criticism. One of the participants, LUZ, stated, "*It is not sustainable to bear this pain forever. The swiftest and simplest approach is to disregard my emotions."*

3.3 Theme 3: Navigating A Tightrope: Rebalancing Amidst Toxic Positivity

All participants agreed that navigating the dangers of toxic positivity is akin to walking a treacherous tightrope positioned high above the ground, emphasising the crucial need to maintain balance while dealing with it.

3.3.1 Self-support

Participants shared the coping methods they could use to reduce their toxic positivity behaviour in various forms of toxic positivity.

Self-Imposed Toxic Positivity. Participants highlighted the importance of raising awareness of toxic positivity to address our tendency to adopt a positive attitude towards ourselves. HAH suggested, "*We require insights gained through reading and learning to counter toxic positivity rooted in beliefs*."

Self-reflection is crucial for managing emotional stress and preventing self-imposed toxic positivity. Three participants emphasised the importance of acknowledging, accepting, and validating emotions without categorising them as inherently good or bad.

> *"We can't just run away…we can think about the reason behind this emotion to solve the problem..." (CCPM)*

Participants also shared that self-compassion can be cultivated by allowing room for self-acceptance and growth. As LUZ and TSY concluded, *"It is normal to face challenges and setbacks, and not every situation requires a positive spin."* Other participants mentioned they would "pause," "rest," and "alleviate stress" before addressing a problem, adopting an active approach to vulnerability rather than avoiding or suppressing it.

Toxic Positivity from others. All participants stressed the importance of effective communication when dealing with people who often emphasise only positive reactions and ignore our genuine emotions. SE noted, "*I will express appreciation for their intentions but prefer empathetic responses to my experiences."* AAD suggested, "*Setting healthy boundaries is key when someone forcefully imposes toxic positivity."* Some participants highlighted the significance of self-awareness in understanding their needs, with HAH emphasising, *"...know your preferences to express when you need support or understanding."* Additionally, CCPM stressed the value of being selective about the information consumed, sharing that she has stopped watching motivational videos promoting the idea of not allowing herself to have negative emotions.

Toxic Positivity to Others. A few participants suggested using appropriate supportive skills and empathy to listen to those around them to avoid imposing an overly optimistic perspective on others. HAH exemplified her experiences, promoting a safe environment where friends feel safe expressing their emotions without judgment. CCPM further elaborated, "*I usually think about the effects of my behaviour on someone's feelings. For example, when I comfort someone, I ask them*

(whether) they want to share (them)... I may give them my suggestions without forcing them to accept them."

3.3.2 External Support

All participants mentioned that reducing toxic positivity is a collective effort. Parents, teachers, and the government all have a role in promoting a more balanced and empathetic society.

Parents. CCPM pointed out that "*one's thought patterns develop from a young age and are significantly influenced by the guidance of the people around them*." Following this, CCPM stressed that parents play a vital role in preventing individuals from falling within toxic positivity during their growth. Similarly, two participants believed that parents can be a positive example for children to manage emotions skilfully.

> *"Everything happens in the family; parents can teach children that it is normal to experience both positive and negative feelings."* (SE)

> *"Parents should avoid practising toxic positivity at home as children absorb everything perceived by the world around them." (HAH)*

Teachers. After experiencing toxic positivity from their teachers, CCPM and HAH firmly believed that educators can establish a classroom environment where students feel safe expressing their genuine emotions without fear of judgment:

> *"Perhaps teachers* can i*ntegrate emotional education into the curriculum to help students understand and navigate their emotions effectively.* (CCPM)

> *"...Include discussions on the emphasis on positivity to let students to critically evaluate messages about positivity."* (HAH)

Government. Most participants said the government should be central to reducing toxic positivity through awareness and education. HAH emphasised the government's potential for *"organising widespread public awareness campaigns that can reach parents, teachers, and the broader community."* CCPM highlighted, *"Policy Integration can be a way to integrate emotional intelligence education into the curriculum."* Others suggested that "*The government allocate resources to mental health initiatives in schools and public settings, such as funding for counselling services, workshops, and training programs."* HAH also proposed that the government collaborate with mental health professionals, educators, and advocacy groups to develop comprehensive strategies for addressing toxic positivity.

4 DISCUSSION

The current study is in alignment with previous research that has established the prevalence of toxic positivity among young adult workers (Castro et al., 2021). Approximately 77.7% of participants scored seven or higher on a pre-survey related to toxic positivity, indicating its presence in their lives. By examining the life experiences of six participants (n=6) following their toxic positivity encounters, this study aimed to understand the challenges faced by participants in navigating toxic positivity, the risk factors associated with such encounters and the coping strategies employed to reduce the presence of toxic positivity in their lives.

Challenges faced by participants in addressing toxic positivity

All participants conveyed that the low toxic positivity awareness and an unsupportive environment acted as a deterrent for them breaking free from the toxic positivity. A ripple effect occurred, wherein participants mentioned they adopted toxic positivity after experiencing it from others (Wibowo, 2020). By adopting an excessively optimistic mindset, participants compelled themselves and others to suppress negative emotions to pursue an ostensibly 'perfect' life. This perpetuated a cycle of emotional suppression and reinforced the idea that expressing anything other than positivity was discouraged. The concept was consistent with REBT therapist Nick Jones (n.d., as cited in College of Cognitive Behavioural Therapies, 2024), who argued that contemporary society greatly emphasises achieving personal success and an idealised lifestyle. This emphasis has created a pervasive "good vibes only" culture that promotes toxic positivity. As a result, participants lacked awareness of toxic positivity's potential negative consequences and became less attuned to the challenges faced by others. The findings suggested that the lack of awareness hindered empathy, making it difficult for society to support individuals under challenging circumstances (Upadhyay et al., 2022).

Participants in the study had low self-esteem in addressing their toxic positivity, likely due to societal pressure from a collectivist culture where expressing negative emotions is thought to harm group harmony. This pressure, stemming from expectations and conformity, can negatively impact an individual's well-being (Dejonckheere et al., 2022). Additionally, participants' religious beliefs hindered their ability to address toxic positivity, as some relied on biblical hope as the only means of coping with negative aspects of life. As contradicted by Vishkin's (2021) findings, toxic positivity is not driven by religious beliefs. Individuals' emotional responses are influenced by their interpretation of religious teachings. Future research should consider personal factors to understand the complex relationship between religious beliefs and toxic positivity. Additionally, researchers could explore the role of religious leaders and institutions in promoting healthy emotional coping strategies and addressing toxic positivity within their communities.

Risk factors associated with toxic positivity encounters

The findings supported that environmental influences, personal factors, and behavioural factors significantly contribute to adopting toxic positivity among participants (Quinto et al., 2021). Participants' encounters resembled those in an Indonesian study (Putra et al., 2023), where toxic positivity was prevalent in social interactions with peers and family members, extending to relationships with authority figures such as teachers and older people. Reviewing the literature revealed toxic positivity in online interactions when participants encountered positive messages on Facebook (Van Zyl et al., 2022) and Instagram (Achmad & Lubna, 2023) throughout the pandemic. In this study, participants reported receiving positive feedback to maintain a positive outlook, which led to its acceptance as a response to challenges. Societal or group standards of toxic positivity were adhered to for recognition, particularly among participants with perfectionistic tendencies. Drawing from Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), the patterns observed highlighted the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, behaviour, and the environment in shaping toxic positivity. Interventions addressing all three factors are essential to promote a more balanced approach to toxic positivity.

Interestingly, while introverted participants were found to be more vulnerable to toxic positivity due to their preference for spending time alone and their tendency to internalise their thoughts without seeking external support (Devi, 2020), extroverted participants were also found to be susceptible when their inherent optimism was coerced (Brito, 2021). However, it should be noted that the relatively small sample size of extroverted participants (n=1) may limit the generalizability of findings. Future research with a more representative sample of extroverted young adult workers is needed to understand their susceptibility to toxic positivity better.

Coping Strategies

The coping strategies identified in this study are consistent with the findings of several previous studies (Putra et al., 2023). In responding to their self-imposed toxic positivity or toxic positivity from others, participants emphasised a healthy self-care approach, such as taking breaks and addressing discomfort before tackling challenges to enhance problem-solving abilities. Active coping has been linked to adaptability and psychological resilience, while avoidant coping is associated with psychological suffering and unfavourable outcomes (Quinto et al., 2021). Increasing self-awareness of toxic positivity was identified as the first critical step in addressing the issue, adding to previous literature (Putra et al., 2023) that emotional resilience begins with self-awareness. Additionally, such an approach can increase empathy as people will learn not to expose toxic positive statements to others. It supports Böckler et al.'s (2017) study that learning to understand oneself increases the ability to understand others. Afterwards, participants highlighted the importance of external support in generating a toxic positivity-free society. Government responsibilities were mentioned, such as increasing society awareness through workshops and seminars (Upadhyay et al., 2022) and changing policies at the educational and workplace levels (Feltner, 2023). Parents and teachers are also crucial, as they play an essential role in a child's development (Aruan et al., 2020). This study revealed that trust and mutual understanding between

these parties foster a supportive environment, leading to a positive change in toxic positivity behaviour among young adult workers.

5 IMPLICATIONS

The findings build on existing evidence that toxic positivity among young adult workers can be traced back to their early experiences in their home environment, school experiences, and workplace settings. Thus, toxic positivity can be addressed on a policy level in various settings such as family, educational institutions, and work environments. Furthermore, cultural differences were found to be a challenge in dealing with toxic positivity, indicating the need for culturally sensitive interventions, particularly in diverse countries like Malaysia. For example, practitioners conducting a toxic positivity awareness campaign should model appropriate language or communication to reach participants from diverse backgrounds. The study also aligned with a theoretical framework that emphasises the interconnected influences of behaviour, cognition, and environment in shaping beliefs related to toxic positivity, which should all be considered in planned interventions. In general, addressing toxic positivity is crucial not only for young adult workers to put in the effort themselves but also for external support from all societal segments to be sought. Disseminating knowledge about toxic positivity throughout society, including parents, employers, work colleagues, and friends, fosters a more inclusive and supportive network and helps facilitate a broader cultural transformation towards embracing emotional authenticity.

6 LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the study contributes valuable insights into toxic positivity experiences among young adult workers in Malaysia, limitations exist regarding sample size, epistemological bias, and methodology. The findings are based solely on six participants' shared experiences and may not fully represent Malaysia's broader population of young adult workers. Moreover, the researcher's epistemological stance aligns with an interpretive perspective when her understanding of toxic positivity would have shaped her interactions with participants and interpretation of data. However, as explained in Section 3.5, the researcher actively engaged participants in reviewing transcriptions and validating findings to ensure the data accuracy. Besides, the study relied solely on semi-structured interviews for data collection, which limited the comprehensiveness and depth of the insights gained. Apart from that, the absence of participants' specific demographic information limits the findings' applicability and transferability to a broader context, as the study lacks a detailed exploration of how demographic factors influence toxic positivity experiences among young adult workers.

Future research could examine a more specific context for the topic. Different research settings and individualistic and collectivistic cultures may produce different results that could better represent the targeted sample. Future research endeavours should encompass a more

comprehensive age range, particularly emphasising middle adulthood to yield valuable insights into the phenomenon across various age groups. This study explored the perspectives of young adult workers aged 18-25 to study toxic positivity and its role in their lives. In future work, the study could include other parties' views, such as parents, teachers, or friends, on toxic positivity behaviour among young adult workers, with additional in-field input from those dealing directly with young adult workers. The combination of different views may lead to an improved exploration of toxic positivity among younger generations in the future.

7 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research indicates the need to recognize toxic positivity as a significant issue impacting the well-being of young adult workers (Castro et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study uncovered that personality, sociopsychological, and behavioural factors were associated with participants' toxic positivity. They faced challenges in coping with toxic positivity due to societal unawareness, an unsupportive environment, and cultural beliefs. This underscores the importance of spreading comprehensive awareness of toxic positivity not only to young adult workers but also to all members of society, including parents, educators, and employers (Quinto et al., 2021). By doing so, we can establish a more inclusive and supportive environment that nurtures a broader cultural shift towards embracing emotional authenticity and well-being.

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