

Workplace Romance and Organisational Performance: A Case Study of Malaysian Organizations

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Abstract

Workplace romance has become a widely discussed topic, with many asserting its presence in the workplace environment's social, relational, and political dynamics.

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Western countries have conducted numerous studies that reveal a noteworthy correlation between workplace romance and employee and organisational performance. However, due to religious or cultural constraints, Malaysians have not extensively researched or studied workplace romance. The current research landscape in Malaysia primarily centres around the topic of sexual harassment, highlighting the need for further exploration and investigation in this area. The objective of this research is to analyse and evaluate the impact of workplace romance on employee and organisational performance in Malaysia. Furthermore, this study aims to shed light on the challenges faced by human resource departments and professionals in handling workplace romance, which is becoming more prevalent with policy implementation.

Keyword: Workplace Romance, Employee Productivity, Organizational Performance, implications, Organization Policies.

Introduction

Workplace romance (WR) has become a prominent subject of study in recent times, capturing the attention of researchers. Workplace romance is a well-documented occurrence that has a significant impact on the dynamics of the workplace (Khan et al., 2017; Quinn, 1977; Wilson, 2015). In addition, research has demonstrated that romantic relationships in the workplace can have a positive impact on various work-related behaviours and attitudes. These include increased motivation, job satisfaction, commitment, engagement, loyalty, and improved performance outcomes (Khan et al., 2017; Quinn, 1977).

In addition, the close proximity of employees, increased time spent together, and the sense of teamwork in the office can foster attraction and romance. Based on a survey conducted in 2005 by Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), it was found that 40% of employees have encountered a workplace romance (Lickey et al., 2009; Parks, 2006). Surprisingly, only 12% of organisations have a formal or written policy regarding workplace romances (Lickey et al., 2009; Shellenbarger, 2004). However, 10 employees in the United States are involved in romantic relationships with their colleagues (Young et al., 2018).

Currently, the factors contributing to workplace romances remain unidentified. Various scholars and researchers have provided numerous explanations for workplace romances, including factors such as love, job autonomy, power dynamics, attitudes, egos, and job-related considerations. Research on workplace romance in Malaysia remains limited. One possible reason for this could be the presence of religious or cultural restrictions that have turned this topic into a taboo, discouraging open discussions. Although some individuals may be hesitant to engage in conversations about this subject, the researcher found it both fascinating and crucial to examine people's romantic aspirations and their impact on Malaysian organisations.

Problem Statement

Workplace romance refers to a committed relationship between two employees that involves physical attraction and various actions, such as dating, embracing, kissing, caressing, and sexual intercourse (Mainiero & Jones, 2013). Many employees perceive workplace romance as an inevitable happening. Blurring the lines between work and personal life, as well as engaging in romantic relationships at the workplace, have often been depicted as risky situations for both individuals and companies (Baker, 2016; Mainiero & Jones, 2013). Research has indicated that conflicts may arise in the workplace when balancing the right to privacy with professional behaviour expectations (Mainiero & Jones, 2013; Mano & Gabriel, 2006). Workplace romance is increasingly prevalent, while high level achievement in this area is also on the rise. Quinn's work in 1977 is highly regarded for its comprehensive examination of office romance, highlighting both the benefits and drawbacks of professional relationships.

Negative consequences often arise from workplace romance, such as decreased employee productivity and performance, legal disputes, and ethical dilemmas (Burke, 2016; Williams et al., 1999). In addition, Quinn (1977) found that workplace romance can have both positive and negative effects on employee behaviour and performance outcomes. Numerous researchers and scholars have conducted extensive research on this topic from various perspectives and contexts. However, there has been no previous research or study conducted on workplace romance in the Malaysian context. In the Malaysian context, research tends to focus more on sexual harassment rather than workplace romance. This situation may be attributed to cultural factors. There is a lack of research on this topic and people are hesitant to openly discuss it, unlike in western countries. The researcher aims to analyse and evaluate the implications of workplace romance in Malaysian organisations, addressing a significant gap in the existing research.

Studies conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) have shown that the prevalence of workplace romances has actually increased, despite the shift to remote work during the epidemic. Approximately 33% of American workers have been involved in a romantic relationship with a colleague, which is an increase from the previous 27% before the onset of the public health crisis. Experts suggest that HR professionals should currently review their corporate policies on workplace romance, as many of these policies are inadequate.

This research aims to address the lack of studies on workplace romance in Malaysia. Currently, only one research has been conducted on this topic, highlighting the need for further investigation.

Research Objectives

As noted in the problem statement, the general objective of this study is to identify the negative implication of workplace romance in the Malaysian organization and the

specific objectives are as stated below:

1. To identify the causes and symptoms of workplace romance at the workplace in a Malaysian organisation.
2. To investigate the implications of workplace romance in the company and its impact on employee performance
3. To explore the perception of the co-worker and other employees towards workplace romance and the people who involved in that relationship and how it is influenced or impacted them at their workplace?
4. To propose the most suitable methods to handle workplace romance by management

Significance of the Study

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the effects of workplace romance on employee productivity and organisational performance, focussing specifically on the Malaysian context. The findings shed light on this topic, as previous research has predominantly been conducted in the United States and United Kingdom. On a different note, the practical aspects of this study may offer valuable insights into the dynamics of workplace relationships and their potential impact on organisational and country development. Therefore, this study can assist the human resource staff and management in enhancing employee awareness and improving organisational performance. This study has the potential to make a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge in this field, as well as enhance the field of human resource management.

This study will also be valuable for the HRM in any organisation in Malaysia to identify and address obstacles in effectively managing human resources. Thus, overall, this research offers valuable insights for different stakeholders, including scholars, professionals, and policymakers, regarding human resource management in various industries in Malaysia and other East-Asia countries. In addition, Malaysian HRM players will gain a competitive edge by enhancing their understanding of workplace romance, enabling them to better compete with other players on a national or international scale. Ultimately, this study delves into the implications and challenges of workplace romance for human resource departments and organisations in Malaysia. In the future, further research can be conducted to explore other aspects of human resources.

Scope of Study

This study focusses on a private organisation located in the Klang Valley of Malaysia, specifically examining workplace romance. In addition, the researcher will solely concentrate on the implications of workplace romance and the challenges encountered by human resource officers in handling such issues. Additional research can be conducted to explore the impact of organisational factors and HR policies on the management of workplace romance.

Literature Review

As per [Quinn \(1977\)](#), organisational romance refers to a connection between two individuals within an organisation that is seen as a sexual attraction by someone else. [Pierce et al. \(1996\)](#) define a workplace romantic relationship as any "relationship between two members of some organisation that incorporates mutual desire."

[Clarke \(2006\)](#) defines workplace romance as "want to be with the other person and feelings of emotional and physical attraction, which may lead to the sharing of personal information, mutual compassion and respect, and quite likely sexual behaviour such as touching and hugging, and sexual intercourse".

Other studies describe collaborations of this nature as situations in which two people share a common interest, have been romantically involved, and/or have engaged in a sexual relationship ([Biggs et al., 2012](#)). Moreover, several key aspects distinguish romantic relationships, including those in a professional setting. (a) These include a strong desire to be in the company of one's romantic partner, (b) a deep and intimate exchange of personal information, (c) feelings of affection and respect, (d) positive emotional states such as happiness and fulfillment, and (e) physical intimacy with one's partner. Researchers ([Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986](#); [Rubin, 1973](#); [Salmani et al., 2011](#); [Sternberg, 1986](#)) have extensively studied and documented these characteristics.

In the workplace, the definition of a loving partnership is based on mutually desirable sexual behaviours, rather than unwelcome or harassing behaviours. According to [Wilson \(2015\)](#), there are two types of workplace romance: hierarchical, which involves individuals at different levels in the firm, and lateral, which involves individuals at equal levels. Lateral romances are more prevalent and also pose more challenges.

Motives of Workplace Romance

Based on the study, office romances can arise from various factors aside from sexual attraction, including love, ego, employment, or power ([Paul & Townsend, 1998](#); [Tengberg & Tidefors, 2016](#)). Someone looking for love desires a lasting bond, while someone seeking ego craves adventure, excitement, and validation of their self-importance. An ambitious individual is looking to progress in their career, ensure job stability, receive financial benefits, decrease their workload, and/or have more time off.

Meanwhile, individuals who are focused on advancing their careers may believe that establishing a professional connection can enhance their professional reputation and impact. In a study conducted by [Dillard and Broetzmann \(1989\)](#), the relationship between workplace romantic intentions and work-related behaviours was examined. The findings revealed that individuals driven by love were perceived by others as having a positive and enthusiastic work attitude. On the other hand, those motivated solely by work tended to exhibit absenteeism.

Table 1: List of Factors Responsible in Formation of Workplace Romance.

S. No.	Authors	Factors
1	Belinda (2017)	Attachment styles (avoidance & anxiety), motives behind romance
2	Doll and Rosopa (2015)	Employees' attitude about workplace romance, prior engagement in workplace romance, & conscientiousness
3	Mano and Gabriel (2006)	Aestheticization of work, work arrangements, performance measures & hedonistic ethics, organizational policy
4	Quinn (1977)	Proximity, attitudinal similarity, job autonomy, organizational culture, & organizational climate

Potential Outcomes of Workplace Romances

Prior studies have indicated that engaging in romantic relationships within a professional setting can lead to significant repercussions. It is clear that the concern for potential sexual harassment lawsuits drives efforts to regulate workplace relationships, sometimes leading to worries about discrimination or compromised privacy ([Clarke, 2006](#); [Lickey et al., 2009](#)).

Positive Outcomes

Research suggests that workplace romance can have a positive impact on productivity, with dating colleagues potentially leading to increased focus and energy towards work ([Lickey et al., 2009](#)). As stated by [Berman et al. \(2002\)](#). Friendships in the workplace have been found to have several positive effects, including reduced stress, improved communication, better work performance, and increased openness to organisational changes. In addition, some organisations have seen a decrease in turnover as married employees who work for the same company tend to have higher retention rates ([Lickey et al., 2009](#); [Wilson et al., 2003](#)).

Previous research suggests that romantic relationships in the workplace can have a positive impact on employee well-being, commitment, and performance. However, it is important to note that there is limited empirical evidence to fully support these findings. In addition, there is a debate among scholars regarding the impact of workplace romance on the balance between personal privacy and professional conduct expectations ([Mainiero & Jones, 2013](#); [Mano & Gabriel, 2006](#)).

Negative Outcomes

Numerous adverse effects of workplace romance have been recorded in academic literature. These include negative publicity, legal action resulting in job termination, feelings of resentment, and doubt ([Burke, 2016](#); [Williams et al., 1999](#); [Wilson, 2015](#)).

Individuals engaged in workplace relationships may face disapproval and negative feedback from colleagues, especially if such relationships are seen as detrimental to fairness and equality (Cole, 2009). In addition, when workplace romances go against established norms and expectations, those involved may experience different responses from management, including being transferred, receiving written warnings, or being verbally reprimanded (Dillard et al., 1994). These reactions can lead to increased stress and decreased morale.

Workplace romances can have several negative consequences. These include a decrease in productivity not only by the couple involved, but also by their co-workers. When the romance ends, there is a potential for retaliation claims. Additionally, other workers may complain about favouritism during the romance, which can create a negative perception of the organisation and its employees both internally and externally. In some extreme cases, workplace romances can even lead to violence (Greenwald, 2000; Lickey et al., 2009; Schaner, 1994).

In a professional setting, a romantic relationship can affect not just the individuals involved, but also their colleagues who witness it. When individuals of varying hierarchical positions, such as a manager and a subordinate, have a connection, it can lead to perceptions or assumptions among colleagues that the subordinate is receiving preferential treatment. Preferential treatment may manifest as a promotion, an increase in salary, specific tasks, or additional perks that are not accessible to other employees.

As per Davis (2000), when a supervisor shows favouritism towards their romantic partner in the workplace, it sends a message to other employees that their hard work and dedication may not always be rewarded, and that personal relationships hold more importance. Consequently, this may erode the confidence and trust of other employees in the management, leading them to believe that their hard work will go unnoticed. Sexual bias in the workplace can significantly impact work performance and have negative consequences for the entire organisation.

In addition, it has been found that work performance can suffer when a supervisor is involved in a romantic relationship with a subordinate whom they directly supervise. This requires the supervisor to simultaneously fulfil two roles: that of a lover and a supervisor. The supervisor may find themselves torn between maintaining professionalism and trying to impress their romantic partner.' These inconsistencies, though, can hinder the supervisor's effectiveness in the workplace (Bhebhe & Hove, 2016).

Solomon (1998) thoroughly examines the correlation between office romance and employee turnover, emphasising the significant impact it can have on an organisation. He highlights the potential consequences of employee turnover, specifically the loss of valuable individuals who may be dissatisfied due to workplace relationships. Office romance poses a moral dilemma in the workplace. According to Aguinis (2009),

professional relationships involving extramarital partnerships and direct-reporting supervisor-subordinate (hierarchical) connections are considered highly problematic and unethical. This is due to the negative perception of extramarital relationships in society, which, when combined with concerns about unprofessional behaviour, can harm the company's reputation (Lickey et al., 2009; Verhoef & Terblanche, 2015).

Finally, office romance may not carry the same level of risk as other emotional issues that can arise after a breakup in a professional relationship. These illnesses may have various consequences for the company. In a study conducted by Little and Manns (2010), the focus was on the emotional impact of ending a professional relationship. Research suggests that an employee's emotional distress after experiencing a loss can negatively impact productivity. This can manifest as difficulties with concentration and decision-making, increased stress levels, feelings of sadness, reduced motivation, and potential substance abuse. Due to these concerns, the organisation is currently experiencing increased healthcare expenses, absenteeism, injuries, mistakes, and missed chances.

Table 2: List of Factors Affected by Workplace Romance.

S. No.	Authors	Factors Affected by Workplace Romance (Either Positively or Negatively)
1	Sutton (2017)	Trust, openness, communication, collaboration, fair & respectful treatment of employees
2	Belinda (2017)	Job Performance, Job Satisfaction, intrinsic job motivation, organizational commitment, organization citizen behaviour – individual & organization citizen behaviour - organization
3	Pierce (1998)	Employee motivation, performance, & job attitudes
4	Khan et al. (2017)	Psychological well-being
5	Bhebhe and Hove (2016)	Social support, safety nets, employee performance & productivity, favouritism
6	Tengberg and Tidefors (2016)	Workplace environment
7	Dong et al. (2013)	Real or perceived favouritism, claims of sexual harassment, retaliation, productivity
8	Salmani et al. (2011)	Stress & worry, work flow, employee morale, work environment, organizational efficiency
9	Mano and Gabriel (2006)	Employee & organization performance

Workplace Romance, Performance and Productivity

The company is considering the potential impact of a romantic relationship between employees on their overall job performance. There has been considerable debate surrounding the possible correlation between workplace relationships and productivity. Several studies have been conducted on different performance qualities, including

competence, absenteeism, job devotion, intrinsic work motivation, and job happiness. There has been much discussion surrounding the correlation between workplace romance and productivity. Quinn (1977) suggests that workplace romances can have varying effects on job performance. Throughout the following forty years, researchers consistently observed this "mixed consequence" and published varying conclusions on the matter.

Workplace Romance in Malaysia Context

In the Malaysian context, there is a limited amount of research on workplace romance, with a majority of studies focussing on sexual harassment in the workplace. Sexual harassment and workplace romance are distinct concepts. Workplace romance typically occurs by choice, while sexual harassment is often involuntary. Culture poses a significant obstacle to open discussions regarding workplace romance. There is a lack of research on workplace romance, with very limited information available due to its secretive and confidential nature. Many cases and stories exist, but they are not openly discussed.

Conceptual Framework for research

Here is the conceptual framework for this study, outlining the key factors influencing workplace romance and the impact of HR policies. The study will confirm the implications of workplace romance for employees and organisations, as well as the challenges faced by the HR department in managing related issues in Malaysia. Here is a visual representation of the empirical research framework (Figure 1).

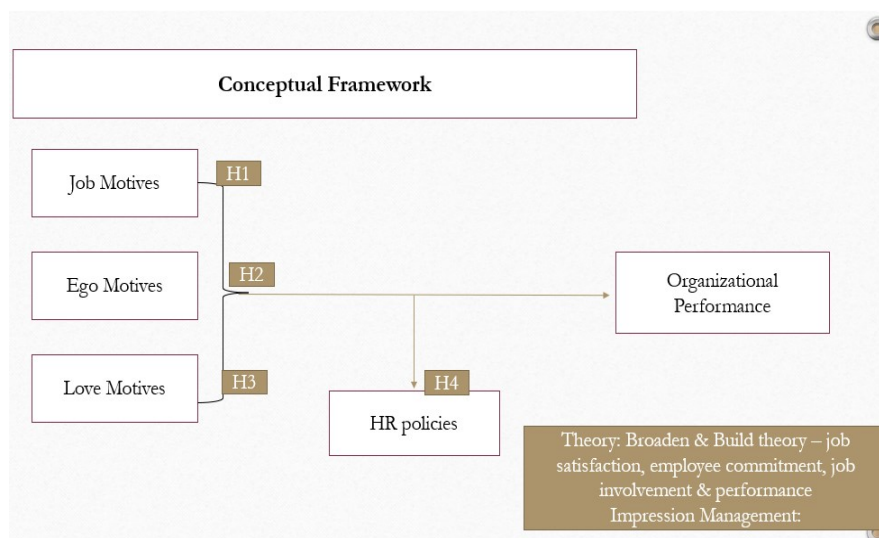


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework.

Hypothesis Postulated

A hypothesis is a proposed explanation or a well-reasoned proposal for a possible association between events. The research frameworks presented above demonstrate the use of hypothesis testing as a specific objective. The results of data analyses will

be thoroughly examined to determine whether the research hypothesis can be accepted or rejected, and to address specific objectives outlined in the findings. In the upcoming sections, we will delve into the research hypothesis that has been derived from the research objectives.

H1: There is a positive relationship between job motive and workplace romance that affects organizational performance in an organization in Malaysia.

H2: There is a positive relationship between ego motive and workplace romance that affects organizational performance in an organization in Malaysia.

H3: There is a positive relationship between love motive and workplace romance that affects organizational performance in organization Malaysia.

H4: HR policy positively effects the organizational performance and managing workplace romance in Malaysia.

Methodology and Suggestion

This study employed a survey research design method and a quantitative approach. Structured questionnaires were utilised as the survey tool for this purpose. Quantitative research aims to address enquiries by analysing numerical data, which is presented in the form of figures and numbers. The purpose of employing this approach in this particular situation is to maintain practical examples and observations that highlight the difficulties faced by the HR department personnel in a Malaysian organisation. In addition, the selected method is recognised for its efficiency in terms of time and resources. Ultimately, the quantitative technique is well-suited to address the challenges and objectives of the study, enabling it to gather empirical evidence from a larger population. The survey sample consists of organisations registered under the Companies Commission of Malaysia (SSM). This study focusses on the selected employee, Human Resource officers, and management staff who are willing to share their opinions on workplace romance in Malaysian companies.

The samples will be selected using a specific random selection technique to include eligible respondents in the sample. For the initial phase, the researchers opted for the purposive sampling technique to efficiently identify and select an appropriate number of respondents. The selection of respondents and the geographical area for the study will be determined by assessing the resources available to the researcher. This includes considering the availability of employee and HR and management staff time, as well as the necessary social support to complete the investigation. The researcher will choose a sample size of 385 individuals employed in the organisation within the Klang Valley region for this study.

Data will be collected from 100 respondents through a questionnaire using the appropriate technique. A survey instrument will be utilised to gather quantitative data for this study. The researcher is utilising a cross-sectional survey methodology, which efficiently gathers data from a specific target group at a singular moment in

time. The survey findings offer causal conclusions, are informative, are focused, and are highly relevant to the study issue (Yin, 2003). The quantitative data will be imported directly into SPSS for analysis. To complete this study, the researcher chose a commonly used quantitative data collection method (Jiang et al., 2023; Wider & Wider, 2023).

The data will be analysed using statistical methods to provide a clear and concise summary. The researcher will analyse and refine the instrument after collecting all the data to ensure that only the pertinent information aligned with the research questions and objectives is retained. The data will be analysed using descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation. Additionally, simple linear regression analysis will be conducted to examine the relationship between training and development and performance. The findings will be displayed through the use of tables and charts.

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