



Abusive Supervision in Southeast Asia Countries: A Viewpoint of Trends and Future Research Directions

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ABSTRACT

This viewpoint article reviews the evolving trends of abusive supervision studies across Southeast Asian countries. This article employs a traditional literature review by synthesizing references from various leading research databases. Abusive supervision is destructive and can cause adverse impacts on employees and organizations. It poses significant challenges to employee and organizational well-being. While extensive research has been documented in various Western contexts, scientific evidence related to abusive supervision in Southeast Asia remains underexplored. Southeast Asian people are characterized by a unique interplay of collectivist orientations and hierarchical power distance that may shape the tolerance, perception, and consequences of supervisory abuse. This article proposes that organizational silence and strong respect for authority figures have contributed to the emergence and persistence of abusive supervision in Southeast Asian regions. Furthermore, societal norms such as filial piety and face-saving behaviors may obscure recognition and resistance to such abuse. This article identifies several research gaps by integrating information from cultural and organizational insights. Firstly, future studies should anchor research directions with cultural values, and secondly, human resource and leadership practices must be tailored to Southeast Asian contexts. Understanding the influence of regional context on the development of abusive supervision is critical for designing responsive leadership development. This article urges context-sensitive empirical studies and collaborative human resource practices to reduce the emergence of supervisory abuse in the region.

Keywords: abusive supervision; employee; human resource; organization; Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

Initially, Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision as the “sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact.” Abusive supervision has been linked to a variety of adverse outcomes, including psychological distress (Tepper, 2000), job

dissatisfaction (Harris et al., 2007), and organizational deviance (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). In many recent reviews, abusive supervision is increasingly recognized as a destructive leadership behavior within organizational research and practices (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2022; Cao et al., 2023; Gallegos et al., 2022). While this construct has been extensively investigated in many countries, particularly in Western settings (Mackey et al., 2017), little is known about its antecedents and outcomes in Southeast Asian countries. Given the distinct social, cultural, and organizational backgrounds in Southeast Asia, understanding further abusive supervision is imperative.

Southeast Asia comprises countries various countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam. These countries are characterized by shared cultural values, including collectivism and high-power distance (Hofstede, 2001). Considering their cultural orientation, abusive authority figures are often endorsed through cultural norms where hierarchy, obedience, and social harmony are vital elements. Possessing these cultural values may determine how abusive supervision is perceived, reported, and even tolerated. In a low-power distance country such as Australia, abusive supervision may be challenged. Still, in high-power distance countries like Indonesia and the Philippines this dominant behavior could be tolerated.

Tolerance of abusive supervisory styles is a central challenge in investigating and addressing abusive supervision in Southeast Asia. Indirect communication is preferred in high-context societies, including in many Southeast Asia countries (Ting-Toomey, 1988). This causes subordinates to avoid open confrontation with their supervisors, and sometimes employees use communication tactics to deal with their abusive boss (Wirawan et al., 2023). As a result, abusive supervisory behaviors, which include micromanagement, public scolding, or even verbal aggression, tend to be rationalized and considered as disciplinary or motivational strategies. On the other hand, collectivist norms in Southeast Asia countries encourage group cohesion and discourage subordinates from reporting their supervisors' mistreatment, fostering organizational silence (Brinsfield, 2013). As studies and practices attempt to reduce abusive supervision, these cultural orientations and values in Southeast Asia might introduce some barriers.

Earlier, Aryee et al. (2007) found that high traditionality (prevalent in Asian societies) could reduce the negative effects of abusive supervision on employee outcomes. This research illustrates how cultural variabilities influence employees' interpretation and responses to leaders' abusive behaviors. In South Korea and China, subordinates may tolerate their leaders' abusive behaviors if they discover that those abusive behaviors bring benefits to the groups and improve group performance (Lian et al., 2012). Considering the effect of cultural values, investigating abusive supervision in Southeast Asian contexts can contribute significantly to the literature and potentially overcome some biases in interpreting the abusive supervision construct and measurement.

In terms of protecting employees from abusive behaviors or mistreatment, employee protections are still rarely available in some Southeast Asian countries. As people tend to normalize and tolerate the dominant behaviors, abusive supervision may be tolerated. In bureaucratic hierarchies, for instance, often embrace top-down control with minimal feedback from subordinates or low-level employees (Faraz et al., 2020). In business, particularly in family-owned enterprises, personal and professional boundaries are unclear, allowing leaders to freely exercise their power. Labor laws, though they protect employees from crimes in the

workplace, do not fully protect employees from psychological abuse and psychological contract violations.

Furthermore, Southeast Asia has also experienced rapid globalization and modernization like in the Western hemisphere. These rapid changes intensified high-performance pressures on leadership roles, causing leaders to use strategic abuse to boost subordinates' performance. When supervisors are under pressure, they are more likely to display displaced aggression toward their subordinates (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). Unlike in Western contexts, Southeast Asian organizations may embrace hierarchical values, normalizing the practices of aggressive leaders.

Despite the above challenges, recent studies from Malaysia (Alias et al., 2022), Indonesia (Haryono & Suharnomo, 2018), and the Philippines (Sanchez et al., 2021) reported widespread abusive supervision like in Western countries. However, it remains underreported and poorly addressed in human resource practices and policies. Moreover, the COVID-19 global pandemic has reshaped leader-follower interactions within the workplace. Many organizations have shifted to remote work, and they also experience economic uncertainty. During this challenging period, supervisors are under pressure, and employees become more vulnerable to abuse (Kniffin et al., 2021). The use of digital platforms may help many tasks but also can facilitate cyber forms of mistreatment, such as hostile messaging. During this transition in Southeast Asia countries, new forms of abuse may emerge via platforms.

Overall, this article aims to explore trends of abusive supervision studies in Southeast Asian cultures and identify some future research directions. The subsequent sections will (1) review the literature on abusive supervision, including those in Southeast Asia countries, (2) identify key research gaps and future research directions for Southeast Asia contexts, and (3) explore some implications for human resource practices. By synthesizing all this information, this viewpoint seeks to enrich our understanding of leadership, particularly the emergence of abusive supervision in Southeast Asia countries.

METHOD

This paper employed a traditional literature review in order to synthesize and critically address key questions and gaps in the literature related to abusive supervision in Southeast Asia. Comparing to systematic literature review (Grant & Booth, 2009), the traditional literature review is more flexible and suitable for exploring issues, identifying emerging trends, and offering theoretical perspectives. Unlike the systematic review, the use of traditional review is without the constraints of systematic protocols. References were identified through non-systematic purposive searches across popular databases, such as Scopus and Google Scholar. Keywords, such as "abusive supervision", "toxic leadership", "organizational behavior", and "Southeast Asia" were used to retrieve relevant records. Relevant titles and abstracts were identified in the record, along with their theoretical contribution, and the source quality. A qualitative synthesis of the selected literature was employed to address questions and research gaps, highlighting some key insights and implications in this paper.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Conceptualizing Abusive Supervision

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) has set a foundation for the development of abusive supervision. This theory posits that when employees perceive violations in their social interactions with supervisors, negative reciprocation that decreases commitment or counterproductive behaviors may occur (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Tepper (2000) defines this construct as sustained, hostile verbal or non-verbal mistreatments exhibited by supervisors towards their subordinates, excluding physical violence. This abusive behavior includes ridiculing subordinates, silent treatment, or undermining subordinates' performance.

Research has consistently documented the negative consequences of abusive supervision. This destructive behavior is capable of reducing job satisfaction and increasing emotional exhaustion and turnover intention, eventually impairing employees' well-being (Tepper et al., 2006; Zhang & Liao, 2015). It is a distinct construct but shares some characteristics with other forms of destructive leadership behaviors, including but not limited to workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2003), petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994), and toxic leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). However, abusive supervision is unique because leaders who display this behavior tend to show sustained and systemic mistreatment, and they focus on mistreating their subordinates (Tepper et al., 2017).

Global Trends and Cultural Moderators

A body of cross-cultural studies has been conducted to investigate the consistency of abusive supervision in diverse cultures. Scholars have noted some variabilities related to how these behaviors are perceived and how cultural dimensions influence people's perceptions (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). In the US or Sweden, where people embrace low power distance cultures (e.g., the United States, Sweden), employee empowerment is encouraged, and this causes abusive supervision to be viewed as unacceptable. Employees are likely to report anyone, including their superiors, if they become victims of abusive behaviors. In contrast, countries such as China, Indonesia, and Malaysia all have high power distance cultures where hierarchical structures are accepted in society, which may lead employees to tolerate supervisory hostility (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). Employees from many high-power distance countries may endure the effect of abuse without resistance and accept this as a part of expected leadership behaviors (Aryee et al., 2007).

Moreover, many Southeast Asia countries embrace collectivist cultures and place group harmony and conformity as vital parts of social norms. This cultural value makes people feel uncomfortable initiating confronting arguments, discouraging dissent, or whistleblowing (Triandis, 1995). Consequently, organizational silence—where people are reluctant to report others' negative or counterproductive behaviors—emerges, allowing abusive supervision to develop over time and be accepted as part of common leadership practices (Brinsfield, 2013). In research, this silence causes unreported abusive supervision as employees tolerate and do not perceive those hostilities as abusive. The true measure of abusive supervision can be difficult to achieve within this cultural context, making comparisons between Western and Eastern contexts difficult to perform.

Challenges in Studying Abusive Supervision

Construct validity and measurement equivalence across cultures challenge the study of abusive supervision and it introduces some methodological concerns. The 15-item Abusive Supervision Scale developed by Tepper (2000) is currently the most used scale in this area. While this scale has been validated across various contexts, it has not fully captured specific manifestations of abuse within various cultural contexts. For example, subtle hostility (e.g., social exclusion) may be more common in Asian workplaces but rarely mentioned in Western-developed instruments (e.g., 15-item abusive supervision scale). It is possible to adapt the scale through translation and back-translation procedures. However, the use of Likert-type scales in multilingual societies can cause semantic distortion. Furthermore, tolerance to abuse may lead to response bias in the self-report scale. Employees may underreport experiences of abuse supervision, especially in organizations lacking confidentiality or whistleblower policies.

Additionally, studies that reported causal inferences are still limited, as most studies explored the relationship between abusive supervision and other variables. Studies using longitudinal or experimental designs are still limited, making abusive supervision difficult to unfold over time or to predict its accumulating effects. This gap is particularly salient in Southeast Asian countries, areas in which abusive supervision tends to be more tolerated.

Considering Empirical Findings from Southeast Asia

Despite its limited number, abusive supervision studies from Southeast Asia still provide some insights into the understanding of abusive supervision in different contexts. In Malaysia, for example, Alias et al. (2022) investigated workplace incivility in public organizations and found that abusive behaviors were associated with distrust and turnover intention. Similarly, in Indonesia, Haryono and Suharnomo (2018) revealed that abusive supervision negatively impacted organizational citizenship behavior and psychological well-being. Some studies in Indonesia have also documented the destructive effect of abusive supervision (Kadir et al., 2024; Syamsidah et al., 2023; Wirawan et al., 2023).

Additionally, in Singapore, Wu and Parker (2017) found a negative relationship between abusive supervision and innovative work behavior. However, perceived organizational support could reduce this negative association, highlighting the potential for interventions in the workplace. Sanchez et al. (2021) found that employees in the Philippines who experienced abusive supervision also reported higher levels of work-family conflict and lower work engagement. In a collectivist culture, such as in the Philippines, open confrontation is discouraged, making people tolerate abusive behaviors. These empirical findings suggest that despite tolerance to abuse, people across cultures still experience the destructive effect of abusive supervision.

Unfortunately, research in Southeast Asia remains fragmented, and empirical findings are still limited. Cross-cultural studies in the region are rare, and little is known about its specific trends, demographic factors, or the role of digital technology in facilitating abusive behaviors.

Emerging Issues in the Digital Era

As previously mentioned, the development of digital communication and hybrid work modes introduce new forms of abuse, and this may be challenging to address in the workplace.

Through digital communication, supervisors may now exert more power and control to display mistreatment through emails, chats, or virtual meetings. On the other hand, the emergence of technology potentially helps employees to implement flexible working arrangements.

Abusive supervision can be facilitated by emerging technology, and this eventually coins the term “cyber-abuse.” Supervisors may perpetrate excessive monitoring, exclusion from group chats, or demeaning messages through online platforms. All these examples have become more salient since the extensive use of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kniffin et al., 2021). In Southeast Asia, unsupervised abuse has been particularly concerning since remote work was adopted. Many employees do not have sufficient digital literacy, and the spread of technology-assisted work is uneven. Unfortunately, the influence of digital contexts in Southeast Asia countries has not been fully explored.

Psychological and Organizational Consequences

Beyond immediate job-related outcomes, abusive supervision has long-term psychological and organizational consequences. Victims of supervisory abuse often report symptoms of anxiety, depression, and burnout (Tepper et al., 2006). These psychological costs can spill over into family life, affecting marital satisfaction and parenting behaviors (Hoobler & Brass, 2006).

At the organizational level, abusive supervision contributes to a toxic climate that reduces engagement, innovation, and teamwork. It may also increase legal liabilities, damage employer branding, and undermine corporate social responsibility efforts. In Southeast Asia, where attracting and retaining skilled talent is critical for economic competitiveness, the cost of tolerating abusive supervision may be especially high.

Future Research Directions in Southeast Asia

Abusive supervision is still an understudied phenomenon in the Southeast Asia region. Although some studies have informed the destructive effect of abusive supervision, the complexity of its effects and antecedents is a lack of scientific evidence. This section will address some areas that need further attention as well as propose some future research directions.

Future Research Directions in Southeast Asia

Over-reliance on Tepper’s (2000) scale has created a critical limitation in the current literature, particularly studies from the Western context. Regardless of its well-documented psychometric properties, this scale may fail to capture cultural-related expressions of abuse in Southeast Asia countries. People may perceive some particular behaviors as abuse, but those behaviors are not mentioned the Tepper’s scale. Therefore, future research in Southeast Asia countries should develop a new scale that integrates local values and embraces norms where employees interact with their supervisors or leaders. Qualitative methods could be employed to explore how supervisory abuse is constructed and experienced across countries in Southeast Asia. These practices can guide the development of emic constructs that potentially suit the Southeast Asian context (Cheung et al., 2011).

Cross-Cultural Studies

Southeast Asia exhibits significant variations in ethnicity, religion, governance, politics, and labor systems. Therefore, future research should go beyond comparing Southeast Asia with Western countries. Comparisons should be made within the region itself. For example, authoritarian leadership may be more prevalent in Vietnam's organizations than in Singapore's organizations. Comparing countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines could reveal how belief systems or religions (e.g., Confucianism, Islam, Buddhism) influence tolerance of abusive behaviors. Similarly, studies can investigate how colonial legacies, gender views and norms, and politics determine the supervisor-subordinate exchange.

The Role of Psychological Attributes

Future studies should also address the role of individual-level moderators that influence the emergence of abusive supervision. The buffering role of psychological attributes such as emotional stability (Xu et al., 2012), traditionality (Farh et al., 2007), and psychological capital (Avey et al., 2011) have been documented. In Southeast Asia, these psychological attributes potentially interact with individuals' religiosity and beliefs, collectivism, and power distance orientation. In addition, research should also examine the psychological processes that are involved when addressing particular psychological attributes. Along with these processes, individuals' coping, resistance, or disengagement could further inform and significantly enrich the literature on abusive supervision.

Improving Methodologies by Using Longitudinal and ESM

Longitudinal and experimental research is necessary to understand how abusive supervision develops in the workplace. Unfortunately, many of the studies in this area employed cross-sectional surveys, limiting our ability to draw causal relationships. Moreover, incorporating experience-sampling methods (ESM) or daily diaries can offer novel perspectives on how supervisory behaviors emerge over time and how employees respond to such abusive behaviors. These methods are beneficial in Southeast Asian countries, where employees may struggle to use self-report forms in reporting their past abusive experiences due to cultural orientations. Employees may report subtle or micro abuse that occurs on a daily basis.

Digitalization of The Workplace and Abusive Behaviors

Supervisory abuse may shift from face-to-face interactions to digital platforms, including video calls, chats, and monitoring software developed by the organization. Future studies should investigate how platform-based interactions (e.g., emails and social media) shape the dynamics of abusive supervision. Southeast Asian companies have rapidly adopted productivity tools and trackers, which may unintentionally facilitate micromanagement and abusive behaviors among leaders. Addressing questions such as "Do remote employees experience different forms of abusive supervision?" or "How does flexible working arrangement through digital platforms affect the experience of abusive behaviors?" These questions are crucial as hybrid work arrangements become more prevalent in the Southeast Asia region.

Culturally Sensitive Interventions

Finally, future research should move from diagnosing the emergence of abusive supervision to interventions for reducing abusive supervision. These interventions should be coupled with leadership development programs while still incorporating cultural values and norms in each society. Questions such as “How can mindfulness or emotional intelligence training be adapted for culturally diverse workplaces?” or “How can leadership development through mentorship, coaching, or peer support help foster psychological safety?” must be addressed. To develop culturally sensitive interventions, some action research methods should be considered to ensure employees’ voices and perspectives are incorporated into the intervention. These practices ensure that the final form of interventions is not only scientifically proven but also culturally and contextually feasible.

Implications in Human Resource Practices

Abusive supervision poses psychological risks to employees and brings some disadvantages to the development of organizations, including human resource practices. This section discusses how human resource practices can reduce the emergence of abusive supervision by redesigning their policies, leadership training, performance appraisal systems, and employee support services.

Developing Anti-Abuse Policies

A formal policy framework should act as the foundation of any organizational effort to address the emergence and the adverse impacts of abusive supervision. In many Southeast Asian enterprises, abuse-prevention policies are either vague or absent. Human resource units should develop clear definitions of abusive supervisory behaviors, including unacceptable mistreatments and providing culturally related examples. These policies or interventions should be integrated into regulations, employee engagement programs, and leadership development programs. Importantly, they must align with cultural values, including but not limited to group harmony, respect for others, and spiritual or ethical integrity.

Leadership Selection, Training, and Evaluation

A leadership development program is perhaps the most crucial element for preventing abusive supervision. Any programs related to leadership empowerment and development involve selection, assessment, and development. All these steps should identify any signs of destructive and toxic behaviors and implement some remedies to reduce the emergence of abusive supervision. Selection processes, for example, should assess leaders’ psychological attributes such as emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and conflict management skills. This process might consider the use of behavioral interviews, situational judgment tests (SJTs), and 360-degree feedback. Ongoing training should be implemented to develop leaders’ skills in people management and communication styles. Case studies from local organizations that include local norms are encouraged, rather than just using Western examples. Performance

appraisals should also measure leaders' behaviors related to managing people using their interpersonal communication competence. The upward feedback mechanism is rare in Southeast Asian contexts and should be carefully implemented as part of the leader/ supervisor performance appraisal.

Promoting Psychological Support and Safety

Victims of abusive supervision can suffer from stress, burnout, and disengagement. Organizations and human resource practitioners should ensure the availability of support systems to facilitate recovery. Many organizational support programs can be adapted to ensure employees receive support in critical situations or in day-to-day tasks. For example, mentoring, counseling, and coaching that target mental health recovery. In many Southeast Asian countries, this mental health issue in the workplace remains a barrier. Therefore, help-seeking behaviors should be encouraged, and organizations should offer supportive programs such as workshops delivered by psychologists or employee assistance programs (EAPs). Considering religions and beliefs in Southeast Asia cultures, collaborations with religious or spiritual leaders can also be helpful.

Preventing abusive supervision is not solely the responsibility of human resource units. Organizations should develop a psychological safety system where employees feel heard, respected, and supported. Psychological safety offers an environment where one can voice their concerns, make mistakes, and take risks without fear of punishment (Edmondson, 1999). Unfortunately, in many high-power distance cultures, such as in Southeast Asia countries, this can be particularly difficult to achieve due to tolerance to abusive behaviors. Fostering inclusive practices, such as listening sessions, town hall meetings, suggestion boxes, or anonymous pulse surveys, can create space for feedback. Employees, leaders and organizations should shift from control to collaboration, delivering leadership practices in much more collaboration styles than power exercises. To foster ethical leadership, rewards should be given to respectful leadership actors or initiators and to those who can develop and maintain team cohesion.

Monitoring Supervisory Behavior

Indicators that may signal the occurrence of abusive supervisory behavior should be measured, this may include monitoring patterns of absenteeism, turnover, and engagement. Exit interviews are rarely implemented, but this can provide valuable insights into the emergence of abusive supervision. Human resource analytics can identify units or individuals with higher levels of conflict which later can inform future interventions (e.g., leadership coaching). However, confidentiality should be considered for all procedures, interventions, and treatments.

CONCLUSION

Abusive supervision consistently deteriorates employees' mental health and organizational climates across the globe. However, this issue is still under-explored in the Southeast Asia region, and employees and organizations tend to ignore the occurrence of abusive supervision. Despite its adverse impact on employee outcomes and organizational productivity, the existence of cultural values such as high-power distance and conflict avoidance often nurture the negative

consequences of abusive supervision. Future research must expand beyond Western-centric research to explore the role of cultures in the emergence of abusive supervision. Human resource practices can further encourage culturally informed abuse-prevention policies, ethical leadership practices, and psychological safety, which later support mental health services. Ultimately, addressing abusive supervision issues in Southeast Asia requires balancing between respect for cultural traditions and the imperative to provide ethical leadership and mental health support. By acknowledging the influence of cultural values, this article urges academics, practitioners, and policymakers to promote respectful and accountable leadership practices in Southeast Asia.

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