

How Workload, Supervisor, and Coworker Support Shape Presenteeism Among Millennial Employees

(Bagaimana Beban Kerja, Sokongan Penyelia, dan Sokongan Rakan Kerja Membentuk Presenteisme dalam Kalangan Pekerja Milenial)

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ABSTRACT

Presenteeism, a global phenomenon, refers to the act of attending work despite experiencing health, work-related, or personal issues that hinder productivity. While research on presenteeism has gained momentum internationally, it remains limited within the Malaysian context particularly among millennial employees. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the influence of workload, supervisor support, and coworker support on presenteeism among Malaysian millennials. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), as of the first quarter of 2020, the total employed population in Malaysia stood at 15.24 million, with millennials (aged 25 to 40) recorded for approximately 9.4 million in 2019. Employing a cross-sectional design, this study collected data from 123 millennial employees in Malaysia through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Respondents completed an online self-administered questionnaire, and the data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25. The findings revealed that among the variables studied, only workload significantly predicted presenteeism. These results offer important insights into the work-related factors contributing to presenteeism and provide a more contextually relevant understanding applicable to the Malaysian workforce.

Keywords: Presenteeism; productivity; workload; supervisor support; coworker support

ABSTRAK

Presenteisme merupakan satu fenomena global yang merujuk kepada kehadiran individu di tempat kerja walaupun mengalami isu kesihatan, masalah berkaitan kerja, atau isu peribadi yang boleh menjejaskan produktiviti. Walaupun kajian mengenai presenteisme semakin mendapat perhatian di peringkat antarabangsa, kajian dalam konteks Malaysia masih terhad, khususnya dalam kalangan pekerja milenial. Justeru, kajian ini dijalankan bagi meneliti pengaruh beban kerja, sokongan penyelia dan sokongan rakan sekerja terhadap presenteisme dalam kalangan pekerja milenial di Malaysia. Berdasarkan laporan Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia (DOSM), jumlah penduduk bekerja di Malaysia pada suku pertama tahun 2020 ialah seramai 15.24 juta orang, dan pada tahun 2019, pekerja milenial (berumur antara 25 hingga 40 tahun) direkodkan mempunyai kira-kira 9.4 juta daripada tenaga kerja tersebut. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk keratan rentas dan data diperolehi daripada 123 orang pekerja milenial melalui persampelan bertujuan dan teknik bola salji. Responden telah melengkapkan soal selidik dalam talian yang dikendalikan sendiri, dan data yang dikumpul dianalisis menggunakan perisian Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) versi 25. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa hanya beban kerja merupakan faktor signifikan kepada presenteisme. Hasil kajian ini memberikan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang faktor berkaitan kerja yang mempengaruhi presenteisme serta menyumbang kepada pengkayaan literatur dalam konteks tenaga kerja di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Presenteeism; produktiviti; beban kerja; sokongan penyelia; sokongan rakan sekerja

INTRODUCTION

Employees' attendance at work is important because employers are depending on the employees to run the daily operations in organizations. If an employee did not come to work due to feeling unwell or if they come to work while feeling unwell, their productivity will drop. This will be costly to the organizations as organizations still need to bear the operation costs although the employee's productivity had decreased due to them being absent because of sickness, or due to them being present at work while having the sickness or other problems. Furthermore, past studies have found that employees' health and well-being were not only affecting their productivity, but also the productivity of those around them (Haddon 2018).

These costs from productivity loss can be observed through absenteeism and presenteeism (Hemp 2004). Evidence shows that Malaysian employees are one of the countries which have a high percentage of productivity

loss and presenteeism contribute much more productivity loss in the workplace than absenteeism (Chu 2017; Zainal 2023). Malaysia had also lost nearly one percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to absenteeism and presenteeism in 2018¹. In fact, absenteeism in Malaysia has been linked to poor work conditions such as fatigue and overwork, highlighting the role of organizational factors in shaping attendance behaviors (Saruan et al. 2019), which could equally apply to presenteeism. Presenteeism also costing more to Malaysian organizations compares to absenteeism (Wong et al. 2020) as the number of employees' working days in Malaysia that were lost to presenteeism is also greater than absenteeism (AIA Vitality 2018).

However, presenteeism has only recently been studied although both absenteeism and presenteeism are common attendance issues in organizations, (Louis 2020). Presenteeism can be said to be the opposite side of absenteeism where it happens when an employee is present at work despite health, work, or personal issues which lead to productivity loss (Lack 2011).

Besides, presenteeism is difficult to be recognized as it is not always visible (Hemp 2004; Garrow 2016). As noted by Chander et al. (2023), presenteeism is often regarded as an "invisible leviathan" in organizational settings, with its subtle presence making it harder to detect yet potentially more damaging to productivity than absenteeism. This is because, the employees who show up at work, might have or not have a health condition or non-work-related personal difficulties. Hence, its nature that is difficult to recognize and costlier than absenteeism makes it worth it to be studied. While, absenteeism can be used to refer to employees who did not show up at work, but presenteeism cannot be used to refer to employees who show up at work.

Additionally, Malaysians' nature and culture imply that they are more prone to practice presenteeism. Malaysia was ranked as one of the countries with the most overworked employees (Nortajuddin 2020). This implies that Malaysian employees might be bearing a heavy workload to the point that they are overworked. Malaysians are also a collectivistic society, as found by Hofstede Insights². Hence, the tendency of Malaysian employees may choose to commit presenteeism to cope with their workloads and to avoid being a burden to their supervisor and coworker by being absent from work is high.

Thus, it can be said that work-related factors play an important role for employees. Past studies have found various work-related variables that have influence on presenteeism which include, for instance, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, job demand (e.g., workload), supervisor support, coworker support, job insecurity and organizational justice (Lohaus & Habermann 2019; Miraglia & Johns 2016). Past studies have also found workload to have influence on presenteeism, as employees often attend work while ill to prevent a future accumulation of tasks (Pohling et al. 2016). Moreover, supervisor support and coworker support are the effective intervention to presenteeism (Yang et al. 2015), as employees who feel supported may be reluctant to disappoint their supervisors or burden their coworkers, leading them to work while sick out of a sense of responsibility or guilt. However, recognizing the workload issue face by Malaysian employees, the role supervisors and coworkers, this study will focus on workload, supervisor support and coworker support, to be studied in-depth with regards to how these factors may affect particularly among the millennial employees' decision to commit presenteeism worth to be explored and novel. As argued by Lohaus and Röser (2019), presenteeism among millennial employees is relatively less well known. According to Dimock (2019), millennials are individuals born between 1981 and 1996. Department of Statistics Malaysia reported that approximately 9.4 million or half of Malaysia's workforce are made up of millennials (Khidkhir 2019) and millennials were estimated to dominate the global workforce in 2025 (Abd Samad 2019).

Besides, the characteristics of millennials also imply that they are more prone to presenteeism. Studies had found that millennials are workaholics, productivity-focused, spend more time working, and consider their supervisors and coworkers as part of their "work parents" and "work family", forming close social bonds at work (Carmichael 2016; Deloitte 2016; Schawbel 2018; Siegel & Telford 2019). Recent studies show that millennials often struggle to separate work from personal life because of constant connectivity and remote work, making it hard to take a break even when they are unwell (Mordi et al. 2025; Oteng & Ngo-Henha 2024). They are also team oriented and eager to show their value, which can make them avoid taking time off due to fear of looking weak, letting down a supportive supervisor, or adding to their coworkers' workload. This supports findings that workplace norms such as pressure to be present and fear of being judged can strongly influence employees' choice to work while sick, especially in team based or service focused jobs (Smith et al. 2024; Wu & Lu 2024). They might choose to come to work although they are sick or having other problems, and their supervisors and coworkers might have a role in the millennial employees' decision to commit presenteeism. Therefore, these characteristics of millennials have similar themes with the work-related factors (workload, supervisor support, and coworker support) already known to affect presenteeism which was mentioned above. Literally, it can be said that the mentioned millennials' characteristics may further amplify this behavioral tendency.

As an attempt to understand why employees choose to commit presenteeism rather than absenteeism, this study's main objective is to study the factors (workload, supervisor support, and coworker) affecting presenteeism focusing millennial employees in Malaysia. As mentioned before, it can be said that the characteristics of millennials have similar themes with the work-related factors (workload, supervisor support and coworker support) affecting presenteeism as found by past studies. This study believes that millennial employee's likelihood

to commits presenteeism is higher than the employees of other generational cohorts due to the traits of this cohort itself. And since the focus of this study is the factors affecting presenteeism among millennial employees in Malaysia, the individuals (millennials) were this study's unit of analysis.

For that, this study contributes to the existing literature on presenteeism, particularly in the millennial employees' context as no presenteeism study among millennial employees has been done in Malaysia. For instance, past presenteeism studies in the Malaysian context were done among hotel employees, public service officers, and lecturers (Chia & Chu 2017; Mahfuz et al. 2017; Omar et al. 2016). Hence, the findings from this study also are relatively more generalizable to the Malaysian context as compared to the findings from the past studies that have been carried out in different countries.

Next, this study provides practical contribution to the relevant authorities such as government and private sectors with useful insights on how to maintain and improve employees' productivity especially among millennials group as this study identified factors that can affect the employee's decision to commit presenteeism.

Lastly, from the theoretical contribution perspective, this study extends the use of social exchange theory (SET) as the conceptual framework of presenteeism studies. It was argued that past presenteeism studies were mainly atheoretical (Johns 2010) where variables influencing presenteeism that found in past studies act as a checklist of factors to consider when deciding on absenteeism or presenteeism, not a theory to explain why/how the decision is made (Cooper & Lu 2016). Social Exchange Theory (SET) helps explain why employees act a certain way based on their relationships at work. It suggests that people's actions are shaped by a sense of give-and-take, obligation, and support from others. These ideas are closely related to presenteeism. For example, employees may come to work while sick or facing other issues because they feel they should return the support they've received from their supervisors or coworkers, or because they don't want to harm those good relationships (Hussain et al. 2025; Karim et al. 2025). Past studies (Yang et al. 2015, 2017) which have used SET have not included workload as one of their variables. Meanwhile, there is a past study that studied the direct influence of workload, supervisor support, and coworker support on presenteeism (Kinman & Wray 2018). Therefore, this study addresses both gaps by using Social Exchange Theory (SET) to include workload as a key factor in workplace exchanges and to explain how social and organizational pressures particularly among millennials which can create a sense of obligation to work while sick or having other problems, reinforcing presenteeism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

Social exchange theory (SET) can be used to explain the exchange process in which employees engage in workplace relationships. SET is one of the most notable conceptual perspectives in many social science disciplines such as management, sociology, and social psychology (Cropanzano et al. 2017). The authors also mentioned that SET includes reciprocal actions whereby one party tends to return the good (or sometimes bad) deeds of another party (Gergen 1969; Gouldner 1960). Besides, SET also argued that through a series of interactions between individuals in interdependent relationships, commitments occur over time (Saks 2006).

SET have been used in past studies of various contexts such as human-robot interactions, child support arrangements, online social shopping purchase intention and relationship between the expatriate and the host country (Kim et al. 2022; Cuesta et al. 2022; Tang & Tan 2022; Lehtonen et al. 2023). However, compared to studies on institutional relationships, fewer studies have applied SET to interpersonal dynamics within organizations, such as supervisor-employee relationships involving psychological exchange and reciprocity (Ahmad et al. 2023).

In most past presenteeism studies, the variables influencing presenteeism were only used as a checklist of factors to consider when deciding on absenteeism or presenteeism, not a theory to explain why/how the decision is made (Cooper & Lu 2016). Besides, past researchers also argued that SET can be used to explain the reasons individuals choose for presenteeism (Redmond 2015; Yang et al. 2017, 2019).

According to Ahmad et al. (2022), SET provides insight into how positive reciprocal relationships in the workplace foster commitment and reduce negative behaviors such as absenteeism. This underscores how perceptions of fairness, trust, and mutual support influence employee decisions to attend work, even when unwell or having other problems, as part of maintaining valued workplace exchanges.

In the context of this study, social exchange relationships can link workload to presenteeism which happened when employees neglect their health problems or other problem to work on the workload in exchange for employment and remuneration. Besides, social exchange relationships can also be expressed from supervisor and coworker support, which happened when employees choose to commit presenteeism so they will not burden their supervisor and coworkers, in return for the support given by them. These reciprocal exchanges highlight how employees may feel obligated to attend work despite illness, motivated by the desire to maintain positive social and professional relationships.

ABSENTEEISM VS PRESENTEEISM

Although both resulted in a similar outcome that is productivity loss, absenteeism and presenteeism are two different things. Harrison and Price (2003) mentioned that there is a consensus in the literature that absenteeism can be defined as a lack of physical appearance in a behavior setting of when and where one is expected to be (Gosselin et al. 2013). Moreover, employee absenteeism can be categorized into two categories that are planned and unplanned absenteeism (Saruan et al. 2020). Absenteeism may give a negative impact on organizations. Mchugh (2002) mentioned that employees in organizations in which absenteeism behavior is present have lower morale, high levels of stress, poor communication, and poor relationships between management and staff (Čikeš et al. 2018).

On the other hand, presenteeism is different and is viewed from two perspectives (Lohaus & Habermann 2019). First is viewing presenteeism as an act of coming to work while sick. And second is viewing presenteeism as an indicator of productivity loss due to a health problem. The authors further stated that presenteeism can be sickness presenteeism which includes, for instance, acute illnesses (e.g., the common cold), chronic illnesses (e.g. diabetes), and mental health conditions (e.g., depression). Besides, presenteeism can also be non-sickness presenteeism which includes, for instance, caring for a sick child/adult at home, marriage problem or engaging in non-work-related activities at work such as surfing the internet (McGregor et al. 2016; Milano 2005; Wan Downey & Stough 2014).

Presenteeism could give negative impacts on organizations such as impacting the employee's performance and productivity, monetary loss, and decreased performance (AIA Vitality 2019; Biron et al. 2006; Vera-Calzaretta & Juarez-Garcia 2014). However, Vézina et al. (2011) argued that presenteeism could also give positive impacts such as helping in preventing workload from accumulating and gaining esteem from coworkers and supervisors (Karanika-Murray & Cooper 2018). Additionally, recent findings suggest that flexible work arrangements, job autonomy, and humble leadership can positively influence employee adaptability, potentially buffering the negative effects of presenteeism (Abdul Hamid et al. 2023).

Multiple factors have been found in past literature to correlate with presenteeism, for instance, job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, job demand (e.g., workload), supervisor support, coworker support, job insecurity, and organizational justice (Miraglia & Johns 2016). Due to the nature and culture of Malaysians, workload, supervisor support, and coworker support were chosen to be studied where there was also a mix of evidence regarding these three variables found in the past studies. Workload not only increases presenteeism but also moderates the relationship (Wang et al. 2018). Similarly, supervisor support was found to moderate presenteeism, as well as having an insignificant effect on it (Ariza-Montes et al. 2021). Besides, coworker support was also found to have a positive and negative effect on presenteeism (Baeriswyl et al. 2017; Biron et al. 2006).

WORKLOAD

The workload can be defined as the intensity of a job assignment (Nwinyokpugi 2018). The workload also is a dimension of job demands (MacGregor & Cunningham 2018). Heavy workload will create more intense job assignments and may produce a negative effect. For example, a heavy workload was responsible for stress or depression at work (MUBE 2014; Open Access Government 2019). The workload may also lead the employee to commit presenteeism where employees will come to work to cope with the workload demands, although they are sick or distracted by other problems.

Besides, the employees working long hours (Devadason 2017) show that they will choose to complete their work regardless of whether they are struggling with health problems or other problems. Besides, a study found millennial employees to be workaholics (Carmichael 2016), therefore implying that millennial employees are most likely to commit presenteeism. As known, a workaholic is someone who works most of the time and could not seem to detach from their work. This means that millennial employees tend to work continuously to settle their workload regardless of their health problems or other problem.

With regards to presenteeism, past studies found that employees choose to commit presenteeism over absenteeism to avoid future increases in workload due to their absence, and high workload contributes to presenteeism (Al Nuhait et al. 2017; Pohling et al. 2016). Besides, there was also a positive effect of workload on presenteeism where employees view workload as an intrinsic motivation to work (Russo 2017). A recent study by Ahmad et al. (2022) supports this, showing that high job demands, including workload, are strongly associated with presenteeism, especially among employees in high-pressure environments. Here, the employees will feel motivated to continue working despite having health problems or other problems.

The link between workload and presenteeism can be explained by Social Exchange Theory. This means that employees feel the need to repay their company by coming to work, especially when they are expected to perform well (Hussain et al. 2025). Because of this, some workers choose to work even when they are sick or have other problems, especially when they have a lot to do or face tight deadlines. Thus, it is justifiable to assume that:

H₁ Workload has a positive relationship with presenteeism.

SUPERVISOR SUPPORT

Supervisor support is one of the common sources of social support and is significant in most organizational contexts (Foy et al. 2019). Supervisor support may be defined as the extent to which supervisors provide encouragement and support to employees within their work groups (Griffin et al. 2001). In past studies, it was proven that receiving support from supervisor's influence employee outcome and turnover intention (Mor Barak et al. 2009; Tnay et al. 2013). Presenteeism may be considered as one of the employee outcomes, and in the light of presenteeism, supervisor support has been found to have a relationship with presenteeism (Gilbreath & Karimi 2012), negatively related with presenteeism (Lu et al. 2013), and had an insignificant effect on presenteeism among the aging workforce (Yang et al. 2015).

Malaysian employees are increasingly prone to presenteeism, a trend often attributed to being overworked and lacking sufficient work-life balance support. As previously discussed, overwork remains a significant issue in Malaysia, and employees commonly struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance. A report by *Business Today* (2019) notes that one of the key contributing factors is unsupportive management, which often fails to establish boundaries or promote employee well-being. This lack of support leads employees to spend excessive time at work, even when unwell or facing personal challenges.

This issue may be more pronounced among millennial employees, who tend to view their supervisors as "work parents" (Schawbel 2018). This generational perception may create emotional barriers to asserting boundaries, such as saying no to additional work or requesting time off for health-related reasons. Consequently, millennial employees may feel compelled to be present at work regardless of their health condition, thus increasing their likelihood of engaging in presenteeism. Interestingly, while several past studies (e.g., Yang et al. 2015) have reported a non-significant association between supervisor support and presenteeism, this study hypothesizes a positive relationship between the two. In specific contexts, particularly within collectivist cultures such as Malaysia's, higher levels of supervisor support may unintentionally heighten the psychological pressure to be present at work. This is because employees may internalize a sense of loyalty, indebtedness, or fear of disappointing a supportive supervisor.

From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory (SET), perceived supervisor support can create an implicit psychological contract, wherein employees feel obligated to reciprocate kindness or investment through increased work effort and physical presence, even at the expense of their own health and well-being (Hussain et al. 2025). This reciprocity may manifest in presenteeism as a form of fulfilling relational obligations. Moreover, supervisors who exhibit high levels of dedication, such as working long hours, ignoring personal health needs, or displaying overcommitment and may unintentionally model these behaviors to their subordinates. Employees, especially millennials who seek guidance and approval from authority figures, may imitate this behavior, perceiving it as the expected norm. This modeling effect can blur organizational boundaries concerning health-related absenteeism, encouraging employees to attend work despite being unwell.

Empirical evidence supports this behavioral dynamic. Wen et al. (2025) found that when leadership behavior is perceived as over-involved or overly reliant on subordinates, it cultivates a culture of obligation, where employees are afraid to appear disengaged or absent. In Malaysia's high power-distance and collectivist work culture, hierarchical relationships and respect for authority figures further reinforce this tendency. Employees may perceive absence due to illness as a sign of disloyalty or lack of commitment, leading to increased presenteeism out of guilt or fear of disappointing their supervisor. Therefore, this study posits that while supervisor support is typically viewed as beneficial, in certain cultural and organizational contexts, it may paradoxically contribute to higher levels of presenteeism. The hypothesis thus suggests a positive relationship between supervisor support and presenteeism, shaped by psychological, cultural, and relational factors. Hence, it is rational to predict that:

H₂ Supervisor support has a positive relationship with presenteeism.

COWORKER SUPPORT

At the workplace, the need of having a relationship with other individuals is expressed through the task and social interaction (Chiaburu & Harrison 2008). During the interactions, the coworkers might exchange an important job resource that is coworker support (Demerouti & Bakker 2011). Coworker support is another common source of social support where coworker support represents the degree of caring and support that employees receive from coworkers (Tews et al. 2013). Receiving strong support from coworkers has been found to significantly influence major employee outcomes and coworker support was positively related to job performance and impacting engagement (Chiaburu & Harrison 2008; Nagami et al. 2010; Schaufeli & Bakker 2004). A recent study by Lee and Hassan (2023) found that coworker support plays a critical role in buffering the effects of workplace stress, particularly among millennial employees in high-demand service industries in Malaysia. This support not only

promotes psychological well-being but also reduces the likelihood of presenteeism by fostering a sense of shared responsibility and belonging.

With regards to presenteeism, past researchers have found the relationship between coworker support and presenteeism. Biron et al. (2006) found that coworker support was not a significant risk factor, suggesting that coworker dynamics may not always influence the decision to work while unwell. Similarly, Kinman and Wray (2018) reported that coworker support was nonsignificant correlated with presenteeism among healthcare workers, indicating minimal influence. In contrast, Lohaus and Habermann (2019) discovered a positive relationship, implying that strong coworker support might create emotional pressure to be present and not disappoint the team. Meanwhile, Yang et al. (2019) observed that coworker support was moderately but significantly inversely associated with presenteeism in older Japanese workers, highlighting that supportive coworkers may encourage rest and recovery instead. These mixed findings reflect the complex and context-dependent nature of coworker support, where it can serve both as a motivator and a deterrent for presenteeism

Moreover, as mentioned, in collectivist cultures like Malaysia, employees often feel a heightened sense of duty toward their teams, leading them to avoid absence to maintain group harmony and not burden others, even when unwell (Chen & Chen 2025). On top of that, compared to other generations at work, millennial employees might be highly likely to commit presenteeism as they consider their coworkers as their “work family” (Schawbel 2018). This perception fosters stronger emotional bonds and loyalty, making them less willing to be absent, even when unwell or having other problems, for fear of letting their team down or disrupting team cohesion.

On top of that, past studies have proved coworker support was negatively associated with presenteeism (Yang et al. 2015). Although past studies have found negative associations, this study hypothesizes a positive relationship, reasoning that in certain contexts, higher coworker support may increase perceived pressure to attend work despite illness, driven by loyalty, reciprocity or the fear of disappointing others.

When coworkers are supportive, employees may feel the need to return that kindness by not missing work, even when they are sick (Chen & Chen 2025). According to Social Exchange Theory, employees may see this support as something they should “pay back,” often by continuing to show up and work hard, even if it affects their health. This feeling of needing to return the favor, or feeling guilty, can make them more likely to come to work while unwell to keep the team working well together (Hung et al. 2025). Accordingly, it is hypothesize that:

H₃ Coworker support has a positive relationship with presenteeism.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Thus, keeping in view the theory and past studies reviewed above, the following conceptual framework (see Figure 1) is proposed. The relationship between workload, supervisor support, coworker support, and presenteeism among millennial employees in Malaysia is shown below.

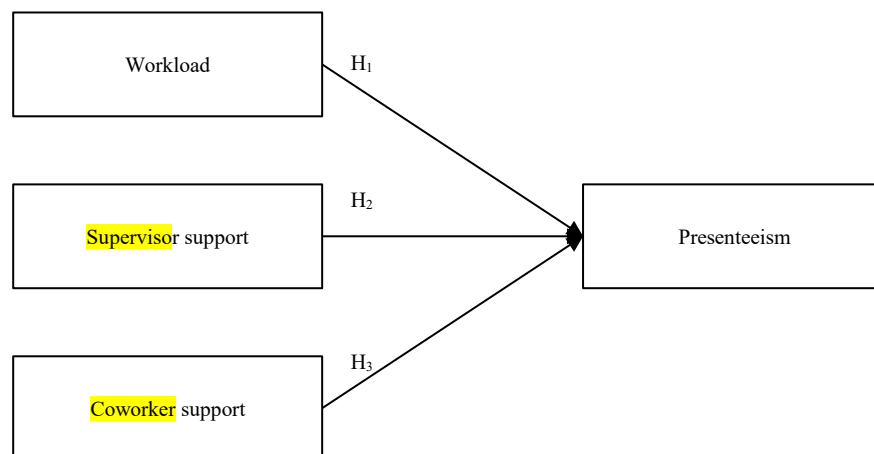


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Framework with Hypotheses

In organizations, an employee will engage in workplace relationships where exchange processes might involve. As shown in Figure 1, the independent variables 1, 2, and 3 (workload, supervisor support, and coworker support) are interlinked to the dependent variable (presenteeism). The figure implies that employees may commit presenteeism by working on the workload given by the employer in exchange for employment and remuneration. Besides, employees may neglect their health problems or other problems and choose to come to work in exchange for the support given by their supervisor and coworker.

Past studies that have similar variables did not use SET to explain how presenteeism was chosen, whereas studies that used SET to explain presenteeism studied different variables (Kinman & Wray 2018; Yang et al. 2017,

2019) than this study. Thus, this study is different in a way that it addressed the differences in those past studies. This study uses SET to explain how the decision to commit presenteeism was reached as well as studying the direct influence of the workload, supervisor support and coworker support on presenteeism.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is a descriptive and correlation type of study. Besides, this study involved minimal interference from the researcher and was conducted in a non-contrived (natural) setting, with the researcher not interfering with the respondents' daily routines or activities. This study also employed a cross-sectional data collection method as the data was collected once, over a period of time. And since the focus of this study is the factors affecting presenteeism among millennial employees in Malaysia, the individuals (millennials) were this study's unit of analysis.

POPULATION, SAMPLING DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) reported that approximately 9.4 million or half of Malaysia's workforce are made up of millennials (Khidkhir 2019) and this cohort was estimated to dominate the global workforce in 2025 (Abd Samad 2019). In this study, the millennials are the individuals born between the years 1981 and 1996 (aged between 25 and 40 years old) (Dimock 2019).

Therefore, the population in the context of this study was the total employed person in Malaysia and the sample was the millennial (aged between 25 and 40 years old) employees. For the sampling method, this study used the purposive sampling method because the target population was specific, namely millennial employees aged 25 to 40, and the sample needed to match these criteria. Besides, this study also used the snowball sampling method due to the practical difficulty of accessing a complete list of millennial employees in Malaysia, allowing respondents to help identify and refer others who fit the same profile.

As for the sampling size, the target respondents were millennial employees in Malaysia. About 384 of survey questionnaires were distributed to the targeted group of respondents. This no; 384 of sample size used as a benchmark for sampling methods is based on the study conducted by Krejcie & Morgan (1970) which indicated that for a population equal to or greater than 1 million, the sample should be 384.

The data source for this study is from primary data which is the self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted primarily based on previous research and findings, to specifically answer this study's research questions. The questionnaire was tested before it was distributed to target respondents across Malaysia. The pilot test was done in three phases. The first phase involved the experts' validation from six industry experts and academicians. And the other two phases involved both millennial and non-millennial employees where the Cronbach's Alpha value for both phases is above 0.70.

Besides, an online survey (via Google Form) was used in this study, and the link to the self-administered questionnaire was shared via social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Data collection was done in April 2021 where 123 usable responses were received, representing a 32.03% response rate. Moreover, to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of respondents, participants will not be required to give their names. The identity of the participants remains anonymous and the data collected is only accessible to the researcher.

MEASUREMENTS OF INSTRUMENT

The questionnaire is divided into five main sections: Section A (Demographics), Section B (Presenteeism), Section C (Workload), Section D (Supervisor Support), and Section E (Coworker Support). Section A starts with a filter question that is, "Are you a millennial (born between 1981 and 1996)?" If the respondents answer "no", there will be no need for them to complete the rest of the questionnaire. While section B, C, D, and E consists of questions related to the matters that are being studied and use a Likert Scale with 5 scales which are 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree) and 5 (Strongly Agree).

Presenteeism was measured using 10 items adapted from the Stanford Presenteeism Scale (SPS) developed by a past study (Turpin et al. 2004). This scale was developed from a similar SPS scale (Koopman et al. 2002). Past research have used either one of these SPS scales in their presenteeism studies to measure productivity loss attributed to presenteeism (Omar et al. 2016; Yamashita & Arakida 2008; Zhou et al. 2016)

The workload was assessed using 10 items. 5 items were adapted from The Third Version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ III) (Burr et al. 2019) and 5 items were adapted from the Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) (Karasek et al. 1998).

Supervisor support and coworker support were assessed using 10 items. 6 items were adapted from The Third Version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ III) (Burr et al. 2019) and 4 items were adapted from the Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) (Karasek et al. 1998).

While past researchers have used either one of these scales in their presenteeism studies to measure workload, supervisor support, and coworker support (Baeriswyl et al. 2017; Mahfuz et al. 2017; Mokhtar et al. 2019), this study utilized multiple established items for each construct to improve reliability and capture a more comprehensive representation of the constructs. Then, the reliability test for all scales used in this study has been proven as their Cronbach's Alpha are ranges from 0.859 to 0.916.

TABLE 2. Reliability test

VARIABLES	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Presenteeism	10	0.909
Workload	10	0.859
Supervisor support	10	0.907
Coworker support	10	0.916

DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE

Data analysis were performed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. First, data screening was done to assess the missing data, outliers and normality. Then, the normality of data were tested through Skewness and Kurtosis. Next, frequency analysis was used to get a summary of the respondents' characteristics. Then, to assess the strength of various predictors of the outcomes (see Table 1), multiple linear regression was carried out (at $p \leq 0.05$).

RESULTS

This study managed to collect 123 responses, after screening out for out-of-sample respondents. The usable responses then became 106, after missing data analysis and detection of outliers were done. The values of all the variables for this current study lie from -2 to +2 for skewness and from -7 to +7 for kurtosis, hence, the data also can be considered as normal (Hair et al. 2010).

For the respondents' profiles, 25.5% of respondents were male employees and the remaining 74.5% of respondents were female. Then, the majority of the respondents were Malay with 71.7% and employees' age fell between the age brackets of 33-36 years old where it represents 32.1% of the total respondents. Most of the respondents are married, which was represented by 53.8% and held a bachelor's degree which represents 47.2% of the total respondents. Moreover, the status in employment indicated that half (50%) of the respondents are private sector employees while the remaining half are government employees, Government-Linked Company (GLC) employees, self-employed/own account employees, and others. Next, many of the respondents work in the services sector with 56.6% and were in a non-managerial job position with 67.0%.

Table 1 shows the results from regression analysis. The analysis showed that the overall regression model was significant as $F = 14.975$, $p < .05$. Besides, the analysis showed that $R^2 = 0.306$ which means that 30.6% of the variance in presenteeism can be explained by the variance in the workload, supervisor support, and coworker support. The remaining 69.4% can be explained by other factors. As known, the main objective of this study is to study the factors affecting presenteeism among millennial employees in Malaysia. Therefore, the low R^2 value does not give a significant effect as this study is to know whether the factors affecting presenteeism found in the past studies will affect presenteeism among employees in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the low R^2 value is similar to the past presenteeism studies (Chia & Chu 2017; Lohaus & Röser 2019; Mahfuz et al. 2017).

Next, it was noted that only workload is significant. This means that workload has a positive influence on millennial employees' presenteeism, $p < .05$. When workload increase by 1 unit, then presenteeism will increase by 0.407 unit. On the other hand, both supervisor support and coworker support do not influence the millennial employees' decision to commit presenteeism.

TABLE 2. Multiple regression analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t-value	p-value	Hypothesis	Supported
	B	Std. Error	Beta				
(Constant)	.875	.509		1.717	.089		
Workload	.409	.086	.407	4.746	.000	H1	Yes
Supervisor Support	.193	.109	.176	1.758	.082	H2	No
Coworker Support	.164	.117	.139	1.395	.166	H3	No
F-value			14.975				
Sig.			0.000				
R ²			0.306				

Note: *B* = Unstandardised coefficient; β = Standardised coefficient; *SE* = Standard error.

p* < .05, *p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

*R*² = Coefficient of Determination; *F* = *F*-statistic.

Hypothesis supported if *p* < .05.

From the multiple regression analysis, it was found that only workload has a significant relationship with presenteeism ($\beta = .407$, $p < 0.05$). Hence, hypothesis 1 which is “workload has a positive relationship with presenteeism” is accepted. Since supervisor support ($\beta = .176$, $p > 0.05$) and coworker support ($\beta = .139$, $p > 0.05$) have been found to have an insignificant relationship with presenteeism, then, hypothesis 2 and hypothesis 3 are rejected. The hypotheses are “supervisor support has a positive relationship with presenteeism” and “coworker support has a positive relationship with presenteeism” respectively.

DISCUSSION

WORKLOAD AND PRESENTEEISM

The proposed structural model results proved that there was a significant positive relationship between workload and committing presenteeism and thus, hypothesis 1 was supported. The increase in workload leads to an increase in presenteeism among millennial employees. The finding from this study is parallel with the previous literature (Biron et al. 2006; Miraglia & Johns 2016; Mokhtar et al. 2019; Lackner & Sonnabend 2023). The authors found that a heavier workload increased the tendency to commit presenteeism.

Employees tend to opt for presenteeism as a way for them to cope with their workload demands. Similarly, a study found that one of the most common reasons recorded for working while sick is to avoid future workload due to absence (Al Nuhait et al. 2017). Distributing the work tasks fairly and giving the employees ample time to complete the work tasks will make employees have fewer workload-related reasons to come to work although they are not well or have other problems.

Moreover, as millennial employees were found to be workaholics, they tend to work continuously to settle their workload regardless of their health problems or other problems. If the workload was distributed fairly and there was ample time to complete the work, then there is no need for the millennial employees to become workaholics. The tendency for presenteeism to be committed by them can also be reduced.

SUPERVISOR SUPPORT AND PRESENTEEISM

The proposed structural model results proved that there was an insignificant relationship between supervisor support and millennial employees committing presenteeism and thus, hypothesis 2 was rejected. Support from supervisors does not increase presenteeism among employees, which also means that low or non-existence of supervisor support may lead to the millennial employees committing presenteeism.

The finding from this study is different from the previous literature (Kinman & Wray 2018; Miraglia & Johns 2016) where supervisor support was found to be negatively associated with presenteeism. However, the finding from this study is also similar to the past research (Yang et al. 2015, 2019) where supervisor support has an insignificant effect on presenteeism. Also, when there is high level of supervisor support, employees were found to display the best performance although they are currently committing presenteeism (working while being ill) (Chen et al. 2021). The mix of evidence from past studies showed that support from supervisors does affect presenteeism but maybe not to all groups of employees. For instance, the older generation may be more responsible and hardworking, as compared to the millennials. Hence, this might be the reason why supervisor support has no relation to them committing presenteeism as in a past study among the aging workforce (Yang et al. 2015).

Nevertheless, the role of supervisor support must not be taken lightly despite the differences in findings. Organizations should encourage the supervisors in their organizations to provide adequate support such as emotional and practical support. Though it may not affect the presenteeism, other human resources problems might benefit from it.

COWORKER SUPPORT AND PRESENTEEISM

The proposed structural model results proved that there was an insignificant relationship between coworker support and presenteeism committed by the millennial employees and thus, hypothesis 3 was rejected. High coworker support does not increase presenteeism among millennial employees, which also means that low or non-existence of coworker support may lead to the millennial employees committing presenteeism.

The finding from this study contradicts from the previous literature where support from coworkers was found not to only lower presenteeism, but also encourage presenteeism (Baeriswyl et al. 2017; Kinman & Wray 2018;

Yang et al. 2015, 2019; Biron et al. 2006). However, this study's results can be supported by another presenteeism study which found that presenteeism was not influenced by the peer social support (Magalhães et al. 2022). Regardless of differences in findings, it was proved that presenteeism practices might be influenced by support from coworkers.

In light of these findings, organizations should encourage their employees to be more supportive of each other. It was found that one of the most common reasons recorded for working while sick is not wanting to burden coworkers (Al Nuhait et al. 2017). Hence, employees can be more supportive towards their coworkers by making it clear among them that it is acceptable to take leaves if needed. Moreover, employees also need to be reminded that they are not a burden if they are absent due to health or other problems. Thus, employees will be less likely to commit presenteeism.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study addressed the main research question, which was to identify the factors influencing presenteeism among millennial employees in Malaysia. The findings reveal that, among the three factors examined; workload, supervisor support, and coworker support. However, only workload has a significant and positive effect on presenteeism. This confirms the hypothesis developed at the early stage of the study, which posited that a heavier workload increases the likelihood of employees working despite being unwell or facing personal challenges. This result is consistent with previous literature, which found workload to be a critical determinant of presenteeism across various age groups. Conversely, supervisor support and coworker support did not show a significant relationship with presenteeism. These findings contrast with some earlier studies that reported significant positive associations between social support and presenteeism. However, the literature presents mixed results as some studies also reported insignificant or even negative associations between support and presenteeism which suggesting that contextual and cultural factors may influence these relationships.

This study contributes theoretically by applying Social Exchange Theory (SET) as a conceptual lens to understand presenteeism. SET posits that social behaviour is guided by an exchange process, wherein individuals seek to reciprocate perceived benefits in relationships, including those with supervisors and coworkers. While SET is often applied in studies of organizational behaviour, its use in presenteeism research is relatively limited. By employing SET, this study offers a novel theoretical perspective, showing how perceptions of support or the lack support may shape employees' decisions to be present at work despite personal or health-related issues.

SET explains the reasons behind employee engagement in presenteeism. Employees may experience a sense of obligation or indebtedness to reciprocate the support they receive, especially in collectivist cultures like Malaysia, where the maintenance of harmonious relationships and the fulfilment of perceived duties are culturally esteemed. In this study, the anticipated reciprocal relationship was observed solely with workload, suggesting that millennials employees may feel pressured to work when inundated with tasks, rather than due to supportive relationships. This indicates that reciprocal pressures may arise from task-related obligations instead of interpersonal ones. The findings concerning supervisor and coworker support appear to indicate a potential gap between the actual availability of support and its perception or communication. While some form of support may exist, it may not be perceived by millennials employees as genuine, effective, or consistent. This insight enhances the application of SET by indicating that the quality, clarity, and delivery of support may be equally important as the mere presence of support in influencing employee behaviour.

The results offer significant insights for organizational leaders, HR practitioners, and policymakers focused on reducing presenteeism and improving employee well-being. The importance of workload indicates that prioritizing work design and workload management is essential. Organizations must perform regular workload assessments to ensure that task demands correspond with employee capacity. Excessive workloads impact employee health and productivity and may create a culture in which employees feel obligated to stay at work despite not being in their optimal condition. Moreover, while supervisor and coworker support did not demonstrate a statistically significant impact on presenteeism in this study, the implications warrant consideration. The absence of notable findings may suggest that current support mechanisms are insufficient, inconsistent, or poorly communicated. Supervisors and coworkers can implement measures to promote a culture that supports taking time off for health and personal matters. Leaders can exemplify this behaviour by establishing boundaries, utilizing medical leave when needed, and clearly informing employees that their absence will not result in penalties or impose burdens on others. Cultural shifts hold significant relevance in collectivist and high power-distance societies such as Malaysia, where employees may feel guilt or fear regarding the potential disappointment of their supervisors. Effective and compassionate communication from management can mitigate this pressure and foster healthier workplace norms. Proactive reassurance and transparent policies regarding sick leave and flexible work arrangements may reduce the occurrence of presenteeism.

This study contributes to the literature on presenteeism by examining Malaysian millennial employees, a demographic that has not been specifically addressed in previous research. With millennials constituting a significant segment of the Malaysian workforce, it is essential to comprehend their workplace behaviour. The

findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating the interaction of generational characteristics, cultural expectations, and workplace dynamics in influencing presenteeism. In contrast to research conducted in Western contexts that emphasize individualism and assertiveness, Malaysian employees may place greater importance on harmony, loyalty, and obedience, particularly within hierarchical relationships. This cultural context elucidates the intricate relationship between perceived support and presenteeism. Therefore, the current findings are more relevant and generalizable to the Malaysian context compared to studies conducted in other regions.

This study provides theoretical and practical insights into presenteeism among millennial employees in Malaysia. The study demonstrates that workload significantly predicts presenteeism, while supervisor and coworker support do not. This finding underscores the necessity for organizations to manage work demands effectively and re-assess the communication and modelling of support. Social Exchange Theory offers a strong conceptual framework for understanding behavioural mechanisms within the workforce, highlighting the significance of reciprocal obligations in influencing employee decisions. These insights can assist organizations in developing strategies to improve employee well-being, decrease presenteeism, and promote a healthier and more productive work environment.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Like any other research study, this study has areas where it could be improved. This limitation may have effects on the findings of this study which may vary from those of other studies.

Firstly, this study mainly focuses on the work-related factors affecting presenteeism. From the past studies, it can be found that there are many factors affecting presenteeism including person-related factors and organizational-related factors. This study can further be improved by including other factors such as person-related factors (e.g., personality). This would provide more insight into the employees' decision-making of whether to go to work or not when they are sick.

Secondly, similar to most of the previous studies, this study employed a cross-sectional study design. Therefore, the data collected can be said to be valid at that particular point of time only. It could not be used to analyze behavior over a period of time. Moreover, this study used a self-administered questionnaire. Hence, the data might not be reliable due to issues like overreporting. The future researcher may use mixed method such as interviews and questionnaires to get more refined results.

Thirdly, this study only focuses on millennial employees and the sample only included Malaysian millennials. Generalization also could not be done to the same generational cohort but non-Malaysians. This study can be further improved by including other samples such as other generational cohorts or non-Malaysian millennial employees. Comparing the results from different samples will provide interesting inputs besides making the results more generalizable.

NOTES

1. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/02/566428/mental-health-costs-malaysia-rm1446bil-or-over-one-cent-its-gdp>
2. <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country/malaysia/>

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