Toxic Workplace and Employee Productivity in Public Institutions: Evidence from Two Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract: *Genuine workplace loyalty enhances favourable organizational outcomes; however, toxic loyalty drives productivity only in the short run. This study investigated the relationship between toxic workplace loyalty and employee productivity in public institutions with a specific focus on two public universities in Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined whether the productivity of employees in the institutions could be enhanced by fear-based, manipulative, exploitative, co-dependent, and peer-based pressure loyalty. Utilizing quantitative and survey-based research, the study comprised 2743 non-academic staff of Benue State University, and Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Makurdi from which a sample of 384 participants were drawn. A questionnaire was deployed for data collection and correlation analysis was done with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS V23). The results indicated that manipulative, exploitative, co-dependent and peer-based pressure loyalty all had a negative and significant influence, fear-based loyalty revealed a positive but weak influence on the productivity of employees in the two universities. It was concluded that toxic workplace loyalty is counterproductive, especially in the long run. Bearing practical implications for administrators, it was recommended amongst other things that, that university administrators, deans and directors should ensure fair clear policies for allocations of resources, create a psychologically safe work environment, strengthen welfare programs, domesticate anti-exploitative policies and labour-regulatory policies to encourage productivity and its sustainability.*

Keywords: *Toxic workplace loyalty, employee productivity, fear-based loyalty, manipulative loyalty, exploitative loyalty, co-dependent loyalty and peer-based pressure loyalty*

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, organizational loyalty is viewed as a valuable asset that develops commitment, stability, and organizational growth. But in specific contexts, especially in public service organizations, loyalty turns into a malign force when members perceive a sense of obligation to remain in an organization due to fear, coercion, or organizational constraints, rather than by real commitment (Dahlan, Omar & Kamarudin, 2024; Klein & Kim, 2018). Toxic organizational loyalty assumes a variety of forms, including fear-based loyalty, exploitative loyalty, manipulative loyalty, and peer or culturally pressured loyalty, all of which can have a significant impact on employee morale and productivity (Al Khoury, 2022; Schneider et al., 2017; Saban, 2024). In public service organizations, where job security is often valued highly than performance, toxic loyalty can foster complacency, inefficiency, and organizational resistance to change (Brett et al., 2016; Saban, 2024).

Public sector institutions are bureaucratic organizations with an emphasis on hierarchy, stability, and long-term employment tenure, which frequently creates a situation where employees remain in jobs regardless of dissatisfaction or lack of advancement (Wolor, Ardiansyah, Rofaida, Nurkhin & Rababah, 2022; Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2019). In most instances, employees in government or civil service positions fear retaliation, blacklisting, or forfeiture of employment benefits if they leave or act against organizational norms (Meyer & Allen, 2017; Beng & Mahadevan, 2023). This loyalty based on fear undermines initiative-taking, critical thinking, and innovation, ultimately inhibiting institutional productivity (Ng & Feldman, 2019). Furthermore, manipulative loyalty where workers are compelled into doing overtime in the name of duty leads to burnout, absenteeism, and inefficiency (Jahanzeb et al., 2019).

An additional public service institution challenge is cultural and peer-pressure loyalty, where employees adhere to a culture of low effort, inefficiency, or corruption following social norms (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2016; Iqbal, Asghar & Asghar, 2022). Such toxic loyalty reinforces poor work ethics since criticizing or questioning inefficient practices may be viewed as betrayal (Ashforth & Anand, 2019). Also, public service organizations usually grapple with exploitative loyalty, whereby employees accept poor compensation, poor working conditions, and poor career development due to job security in the long run (Al Khoury, 2022; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Consequently, toxic loyalty kills motivation and fosters a mediocrity culture instead of performance excellence (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

While loyalty is important for organizational stability, its toxic versions in public institutions get in the way of productivity, innovation, and service delivery (Thapa, Giridharan, Thapa & Pandey, 2022). Administrators and policymakers should, hence, promote a merit-based, recognition-based, and professional development-based work environment and not fear or coercion-based retention strategies (Wang et al., 2019). Eliminating toxic workplace loyalty is crucial to increasing efficiency and for public service institutions to perform their roles effectively.

1.2 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In government institutions especially, within the university system, toxic workplace loyalty has led to a culture where employees exhibit counterproductive work behaviours, including resistance to change, lack of innovation, and engaging in unethical practices (Ashforth & Anand, 2019). Loyalty based on fear suppresses whistleblowing, enabling corruption and inefficiency to thrive (Meyer & Allen, 2017). The toxic loyalty ultimately overwhelms employees, leading to burnout and poor job performance (Jahanzeb et al., 2019; Abbas & Saad, 2020). This also results in disengagement, whereby employees have no interest in organizational objectives, resulting in reduced productivity (Ng & Feldman, 2019). Toxic loyalty also perpetuates mediocrity and undermines merit-based performance (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2016). Public universities therefore experience bureaucratic gridlock, inefficient delivery of services, and erosion of public confidence in the institutions. Solving the issue of toxic loyalty is central to the creation of a good organizational climate and enhancing effectiveness in public sector organizations (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2019). As such, this research investigates the correlation between toxic loyalty at work and workers' productivity.

1.3 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to examine whether toxic workplace loyalty has any influence on the productivity of employees in public sector institutions with particular emphasis on tertiary institutions in Benue State. Specifically, the study aims to:
i.   Assess whether fear-based loyalty impacts employees' productivity in Benue State tertiary institutions.
ii. Examine the impact of manipulative loyalty on employees' productivity in Benue State tertiary institutions.
iii. Analyze the influence of exploitative loyalty on employees' productivity in Benue State tertiary institutions.
iv. Investigate how codependent loyalty influences the productivity of employees in tertiary institutions in Benue State.
v.   Evaluate the impact of peer-pressured loyalty on employees' productivity in Benue State tertiary institutions.

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2 Toxic Workplace Loyalty

Workplace loyalty is traditionally seen as a positive trait that fosters commitment and stability within an organization. However, in some cases, loyalty can become harmful, leading to negative outcomes for both employees and businesses (Ahmed, et al., 2024). Toxic workplace loyalty can take several forms, including fear-based loyalty, manipulative loyalty, exploitative loyalty, co-dependent loyalty, and peer-pressured loyalty. These dynamics create situations where employees feel trapped in their jobs despite unfavourable conditions, resulting in stress, burnout, and decreased productivity (Schneider et al., 2017).

Fear-based loyalty occurs when employees stay in their roles out of fear of retaliation, job loss, or industry blacklisting (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2019; Klein & Kim, 2018). This is particularly common in authoritarian workplaces where employees feel powerless to voice concerns, leading to dissatisfaction and a desire to leave (Van den Broeck et al., 2021; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2016). Manipulative loyalty involves emotional blackmail, where employers create a sense of irreplaceability or make employees feel personally responsible for the company's success (Shoss, 2017; Lepine et al., 2016). This results in overwork, stress, and a poor work-life balance, increasing anxiety and depression among employees (Greenhaus & Powell, 2017; Giorgi et al., 2020).

Exploitative loyalty pressures employees to sacrifice their well-being through excessive workloads, unfair pay, or loss of personal time (Jahanzeb et al., 2019; Hobfoll et al., 2018). This is particularly prevalent in high-stress industries, contributing to burnout and high turnover rates (Salanova et al., 2016; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Co-dependent loyalty leads employees to develop an unhealthy attachment to their workplace, believing they cannot succeed elsewhere (Wang et al., 2019; Rusbult & Farrell, 2018). Organizations reinforce this by discouraging career growth, ultimately leading to professional stagnation (Ng & Feldman, 2019; Deci & Ryan, 2017).

Peer-pressured loyalty emerges from workplace cultures that discourage employees from questioning practices or leaving the organization (Ashforth & Anand, 2019; Meyer & Allen, 2017). Employees may fear social exclusion and tolerate unhealthy work environments, which stifles creativity and advocacy (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2016; Dahlan, Omar & Kamarudin, 2024).

2.2 Employee Productivity

Employee productivity is a key factor in an organization's success, measuring how efficiently and effectively employees achieve their work goals. It is often defined by the amount of output an employee produces compared to the resources used (Drucker, 2017). Pritchard (2019) describes employee productivity as the ratio of work completed relative to the time, effort, and capital invested. Similarly, Schultz (2020) views productivity as the extent to which employees maximize their skills, knowledge, and experience to

improve organizational performance. From a human resource management perspective, Armstrong and Taylor (2021) define productivity as an employee's ability to produce high-quality work within set deadlines while maintaining efficiency and engagement.

Several factors influence employee productivity, including workplace conditions, motivation, leadership, and job satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2017). A supportive work environment that promotes collaboration and autonomy enhances productivity, whereas toxic work environments hinder it (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2019; Khan, et al., 2021). Research suggests that employees who feel psychologically safe and recognized tend to be more engaged and perform better than those subjected to fear-based or manipulative loyalty (Van den Broeck et al., 2021).

2.3 TOXIC WORKPLACE LOYALTY AND EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY

Toxic workplace loyalty can significantly harm employee productivity by making workers feel obligated to stay in their jobs despite unfavourable conditions (Al Soqair & Al Gharib, 2023; Iqbal, Parray & Bharadwaj, 2025). Productivity is driven by motivation, job satisfaction, and psychological well-being (Arubayi, 2023; Deci & Ryan, 2017). However, when loyalty is enforced through fear, manipulation, exploitation, co-dependency, or peer pressure, employees experience stress, burnout, and disengagement, ultimately reducing efficiency and performance (Van den Broeck et al., 2021; Iqbal, et al., 2025). Fear-based loyalty, where employees stay due to the threat of job loss or retaliation, stifles creativity and innovation because employees hesitate to voice their opinions or take initiative (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2019). Studies show that employees working in fear-driven environments tend to be less engaged and more frequently absent, which negatively impacts overall organizational productivity (Rasool, Wang, Tang, Saeed & Iqbal, 2021; Khan, Khan, Jan, Javad & Khattak, 2021; Klein & Kim, 2018). Additionally, fear-based loyalty creates a culture of mere compliance rather than genuine commitment, leading employees to contribute only the bare minimum to their roles (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2016; Al Soqair & Al Gharib, 2023).

Similarly, manipulative loyalty, where employers use emotional blackmail or guilt to retain employees leads to heightened stress and anxiety in the workplace (George, 2023; Octavian, 2023; Shoss, 2017). Employees subjected to this form of loyalty often work excessive hours to prove their commitment, resulting in both physical and mental exhaustion (Octavian, 2023; Lepine et al., 2016). Research has shown that overworked employees suffer from cognitive fatigue, which reduces their ability to focus and make effective decisions (George, 2023; Greenhaus & Powell, 2017). Exploitative loyalty, on the other hand, forces employees to prioritize organizational interests over their personal well-being, often at the cost of fair compensation and work-life balance (Jahanzeb et al., 2019; Taghikilani, 2024). Studies suggest that companies that exploit employees under the guise of loyalty face higher turnover rates, as workers eventually leave for better opportunities (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

In some cases, employees develop a belief that they cannot succeed elsewhere, leading to professional stagnation and declining motivation (Ng & Feldman, 2019). When employees remain in toxic work environments due to self-doubt, their engagement and efficiency suffer, ultimately reducing overall productivity (Deci & Ryan, 2017; Haeruddin, Akbar, Dipoatmodjo, Kurniawan & Abadi, 2022). Research also indicates that peer-pressured loyalty forces employees to conform to organizational expectations out of fear of social rejection (Brett et al., 2016; Muhammad, 2023). This discourages creativity and innovation, as employees avoid challenging existing norms (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2016; Rasool, et al., 2021). Studies show that toxic, loyalty-driven workplace cultures suppress proactive behaviour, leading to stagnation and inefficiency (Ashforth & Anand, 2019).

2.4 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

The study is anchored on the conservation of resources theory and the social exchange theory. The conservation of resources theory, developed by Hobfoll (1989), explains how individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and protect valuable resources such as job security, social status, and career growth. In toxic workplace loyalty, employees may remain committed to an organization due to fear-based or exploitative loyalty, fearing they will lose these critical resources if they leave (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Taghikilani, 2024). Prolonged exposure to this stress leads to emotional exhaustion, lower job satisfaction, and decreased productivity (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Additionally, some employees may overwork and experience burnout due to manipulative loyalty, mistakenly believing that excessive dedication will guarantee future rewards. Unfortunately, this often results in reduced efficiency (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

The social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that workplace relationships operate on a principle of reciprocity, where employees expect fair treatment in return for their loyalty. However, in toxic loyalty environments, employees feel pressured to stay due to codependent or peer-pressured loyalty, even when the organization fails to provide fair compensation or supportive work conditions (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Asamoah-Appiah, Kumi & Yeboah, 2024). This imbalance leads to dissatisfaction, low motivation, and poor productivity (Emerson, 1976). Employees who feel exploited are more likely to engage in counterproductive behaviours, ultimately reducing overall organizational efficiency (Shoss, 2017).

2.5 HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Studies have established the nexus between toxic workplace loyalty and workers' productivity specifically in public sector organizations (Ahmed, Atta, El-Monshed & Mohamed, 2024). Loyalty based on fear compels workers to stay in organizations out of fear of retaliation, loss of job, or career stagnation, leading to low motivation and engagement (Meyer & Allen, 2017). Trapped employees are also less creative, satisfied, and more stressed, all of which contribute to lower productivity overall (Jahanzeb et al., 2019). Studies have shown that psychologically safe organizations are more productive than coercive loyalty-based organizations (Ashforth & Anand, 2019). Fear-based loyalty, therefore, leads to employees' disengagement and ineffectiveness, and this constrains the performance of the public sector (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2019). The researchers hypothesized thus:
H₁: Fear-based loyalty will significantly affect employee productivity in public institutions.

Manipulative loyalty happens when organizations pressure employees into excessive commitment by making them feel guilty, often ignoring their well-being (Ng & Feldman, 2019). These tactics can lead to emotional exhaustion, chronic stress, and decreased job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Studies indicate that employees who experience emotional blackmail are more likely to consider leaving their jobs and tend to have lower job satisfaction (Jahanzeb et al., 2019). This issue is particularly common in public institutions, where employees often struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance, increasing their risk of burnout and lowering overall efficiency (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Ultimately, manipulative loyalty has a negative impact on long-term employee productivity. Hence the researchers hypothesize that:
H₂: Manipulative loyalty leads to employee burnout and reduced productivity.

Exploitative loyalty leads workers to abandon personal well-being and fair compensation in pursuit of loyalty towards an organization (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2016). Government officials who face unfavorable workplaces for which little compensation is given have lower levels of motivation and dedication (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2019). If workers are not esteemed, passion for work is lost, which leads to lower levels of productivity and job performance (Schneider et al., 2017). Exploitative loyalty, therefore, installs a demotivating culture of discouraging high levels of performance in public entities (Brett et al., 2016). The study hereby proposes that:
H₃: Exploitative loyalty reduces employee productivity in public institutions.

Codependent loyalty results in an unhealthy attachment to work, making workers assume they will not succeed elsewhere despite being mistreated (Meyer & Allen, 2017). This leads to stagnation, as employees resist opportunities for career advancement and creativity (Ng & Feldman, 2019). Empirical evidence indicates that codependently loyal workers struggle to take initiative or adapt, making it difficult for them to contribute positively to organizational growth (Ashforth & Anand, 2019). In the public sector, this creates bureaucratic inertia, where outdated practices persist despite reducing efficiency and public service delivery (Jahanzeb et al., 2019). This suffices that:
H₄: Co-dependent loyalty hinders the productivity of employees in public institutions.

Work culture in public institutions often enforces excessive loyalty through peer pressure, discouraging workers from challenging inefficiencies (O'Reilly & Chatman, 2016). Employees may fear social and professional repercussions for speaking out against corruption, poor management, or outdated practices (Ashforth & Anand, 2019). Research suggests that rigid organizational cultures that prioritize loyalty above all else lead to lower employee motivation and overall inefficiency (Gonzalez-Morales et al., 2019). As a result, peer pressure and cultural loyalty contribute to workplace stagnation, ultimately undermining productivity in public service agencies (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The study thus hypothesized that:
H₅: Peer-pressured loyalty harms employee productivity in public institutions.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Population

The study employed a quantitative research design to examine the impact of toxic workplace loyalty on employee productivity among non-academic staff in two public universities in Benue State, Nigeria. A cross-sectional survey approach was used to collect data at a single point in time, allowing for the analysis of relationships between the variables under study. The target population comprised 2743 non-academic staff from Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University and Benue State University, Makurdi, Benue State from which a sample of 349 was drawn using Taro Yamane (1967) statistical sample size formula. 10% buffer was added to the sample size and the original sample was 384 participants. A random sampling method was applied to select respondents, ensuring equal opportunity for participation and minimizing sampling bias. This approach enhanced the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of non-academic staff in the selected universities.

3.2 Data Collection Instrument and Collection Procedure

A standardized questionnaire served as the primary tool for data collection. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions designed to assess various dimensions of toxic workplace loyalty, including manipulative loyalty, fear-based loyalty, co-dependent loyalty, peer-pressured loyalty, and exploitative loyalty, as well as their impact on employee productivity. The questionnaire items were adapted from validated scales used in previous research and modified to fit the study's context. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Physical copies of the questionnaires were distributed to non-academic staff in the selected universities, and respondents were given two weeks to complete them. All ethical guidelines, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the process.

3.3 Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using correlation analysis to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between toxic workplace loyalty and employee productivity. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions and percentages were also used to summarize the demographic characteristics of respondents. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was used for data processing and analysis.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability of the research instrument, a Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted, with a threshold of 0.7 and above considered acceptable for strong internal consistency. Validity was established through expert review and a pilot study, allowing for necessary adjustments to enhance the clarity and relevance of the questionnaire items.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to ethical research guidelines, ensuring that participation was voluntary, responses remained anonymous, and data were used solely for academic purposes. Approval for data collection was obtained from the relevant university authorities.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Test	Value
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure	0.613
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Chi-Square)	770.181
df	10
Sig. (p-value)	0.000

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Table 1 shows a KMO value of 0.613, indicating a moderate level of sampling adequacy, making factor analysis appropriate. The significant Bartlett's test ($p < 0.05$) confirms the presence of correlations among variables, supporting the justification for factor extraction. This further validates the construct measurement of toxic workplace loyalty dimensions in the study.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Construct	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Coefficient	AVE
Fear-Based Loyalty	9		0.639	0.718
Manipulative Loyalty	9		0.594	0.716
Exploitative Loyalty	9	0.690	0.639	0.530
Co-dependent Loyalty	9		0.790	0.876
Peer-Pressured Loyalty	9		0.571	0.871

Source: Field Survey (2025)

The Cronbach's Alpha of 0.690 indicates acceptable internal consistency of the survey instrument, with an improved 0.735 when standardized. This suggests that the constructs used to measure toxic workplace loyalty and employee productivity are reliable for analysis. The AVE values indicate the level of variance captured by each factor compared to measurement error. AVE values above 0.50 suggest good construct validity. Co-dependent loyalty (0.876) and peer-pressured loyalty (0.871) have the highest explanatory power, implying they significantly contribute to toxic loyalty behaviours in public universities.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	137	38.6%
	Male	218	61.4%
Total		**355**	**100.0**
Age of Respondents	18-25 years	32	9.0%
	26-35 years	129	36.3%
	36-45 years	149	42.0%
	46 years and above	45	12.7%
Total		**355**	**100.0**
Education	Diploma	179	50.4%
	HND/Bachelor's Degree	105	29.6%
	Master's Degree	47	13.2%
	PhD	24	6.8%
Total		**355**	**100.0**
Work Experience	0-5 years	30	8.5%
	6-10 years	87	24.5%
	11-15 years	125	35.2%
	16-20 years	68	19.2%
	Above 20 years	45	12.7%
Total		**355**	**100.0**

Source: Field Survey (2025)

The table above reveals the gender distribution of the respondents which shows 218 participants (61.4%) were male, while 137 (38.6%) were female. This shows that males represent a larger proportion of the workforce, nearly 65%, which may suggest a workplace environment traditionally dominated by men or a disparity in opportunities for women. The relatively lower percentage of females (38.6%) highlights a potential area for improvement in achieving gender equity within the organization. However, it is obvious that the data cut across all the gender groups.

Table 3 also revealed that the majority of the respondents (42.0%) were aged between 36-45 years, indicating a workforce with significant life and professional experience. Those aged 26-35 years follow closely, comprising 129 participants (36.3%), representing a younger, energetic segment of the workforce. Meanwhile, respondents aged 46 years and above account for 45 participants (12.7%), indicating a smaller, older demographic. The smallest group, aged 18-25 years, includes only 32 participants (9.0%), reflecting minimal representation from the youngest working generation. This age distribution suggests a workforce primarily consisting of middle-aged employees, which may positively impact organizational stability and expertise.

Regarding education, nearly half of the respondents (179 or 50.4%) possess a Diploma, making it the most common qualification. Those with HND/Bachelor's degrees represent 105 participants (29.6%), while 47 (13.2%) hold a Master's degree. Only 24 participants representing 6.8% have attained a Ph.D. The data indicates that while the workforce is moderately educated, there is a notable gap in advanced academic qualifications, such as Master's and Ph.D. degrees. This suggests an opportunity for investment in further education and training programs to enhance the overall competency of the workforce.

The work experience of the respondents revealed a significant proportion of the workforce (125 or 35.2%) has 11-15 years of work experience, reflecting a seasoned group of employees. Those with 6-10 years of experience constitute 87 respondents (24.5%), while respondents with 16-20 years account for 68 (19.2%). Interestingly, 45 respondents (12.7%) have over 20 years of experience, representing a group of highly experienced employees. The smallest category, 0-5 years of experience, includes 30 respondents (8.5%). This distribution indicates that the workforce is predominantly composed of experienced employees, which is advantageous for organizational productivity and knowledge transfer.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Table 4: Correlation Results

Variables	Employee Productivity
Fear-Based Loyalty	.137**
Manipulative Loyalty	-.284**

Exploitative Loyalty	-.289**
Codependent Loyalty	-.442**
Peer-Pressured Loyalty	-.252**

Dependent Variable: Employee Productivity, Note: Sig is at 0.05 *(2-tailed significance).*
Source: Data Output from Field Survey (2025)

The correlation analysis reveals a significant negative relationship between toxic workplace loyalty and employee productivity, suggesting that employees subjected to toxic loyalty tend to perform less efficiently. A weak but significant positive correlation was found between fear-based loyalty and employee productivity ($r = 0.137$, $p < 0.01$). This finding is counter-intuitive as the result failed to align with H1. This is because employees who remain in an organization due to fear of job loss, retaliation, or career stagnation tend to have lower creativity, engagement, and problem-solving abilities. Fear-based work environments discourage innovation and create a culture of compliance rather than productivity. The implication is that authoritative management styles in public universities that rely on fear-based loyalty may lower staff morale, increase work-related stress, and decrease efficiency. This finding aligns with the research of Gonzalez-Morales et al. (2019), Klein and Kim (2018), and Van den Broeck et al. (2021).

The study also identifies a moderate negative correlation between manipulative loyalty and productivity ($r = -0.284$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that workplaces, where employers use guilt, emotional blackmail, or unrealistic expectations to enforce loyalty, contribute to job dissatisfaction. Employees in such environments often feel overworked and emotionally drained, leading to reduced productivity. This finding is consistent with existing literature, which suggests that manipulative loyalty exacerbates work-life conflicts, causing emotional exhaustion and absenteeism (Greenhaus & Powell, 2017; Shoss, 2017; Lepine et al., 2016). The implication is that public universities should adopt fair and transparent management practices rather than coercive strategies that drain employees' motivation and engagement.

A moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.289$, $p < 0.01$) was also found between exploitative loyalty and employee productivity. This suggests that universities that expect employees to work excessively without fair compensation or recognition experience higher burnout rates. Exploitative workplaces create resentment among employees, reducing engagement and task efficiency. This finding is consistent with research by Jahanzeb et al. (2019), Bakker and Demerouti (2017), Salanova et al. (2016), and Hobfoll et al. (2018), who found that overworked employees suffer from reduced cognitive capacity and lower job performance. The implication is that public universities should ensure fair remuneration, balanced workloads, and career growth opportunities to mitigate the negative effects of exploitative loyalty on productivity.

Co-dependent loyalty shows the strongest negative correlation with employee productivity ($r = -0.442$, $p < 0.01$). Employees who develop an unhealthy attachment to their workplace, believing they cannot succeed elsewhere, tend to experience professional stagnation and low innovation levels. This type of toxic loyalty is reinforced when organizations discourage external career mobility. The study aligns with findings from Ng and Feldman (2019), Rusbult and Farrell (2018), Deci and Ryan (2017), and Wang et al. (2019), which suggest that employees trapped in co-dependent loyalty lack motivation for skill development or taking on new responsibilities, ultimately reducing institutional efficiency. The implication is that public universities should foster a culture that encourages career progression, reskilling, and professional mobility to enhance employee engagement and productivity.

Finally, the study finds a negative correlation between peer-pressured loyalty and productivity ($r = -0.252$, $p < 0.01$). Employees in organizations where workplace culture enforces extreme commitment through peer pressure are less likely to question inefficiencies, raise concerns, or propose innovative solutions. This conformity results in stagnation, reduced creativity, and a lack of employee empowerment. The implication is that public universities should move away from rigid, outdated loyalty expectations and instead foster a culture where constructive feedback and innovation are encouraged. All the findings resonates with the conservation of resources and social exchange theories.

Implications for Administrators

The findings highlight that toxic workplace loyalty negatively impacts long-term employee productivity in public universities. While fear-based, manipulative, exploitative, co-dependent, and peer-pressured loyalty may create short-term compliance, they ultimately lead to burnout, disengagement, and inefficiency. To improve productivity, university administrators should implement fair HR policies, transparent career advancement opportunities, and supportive work environments. Promoting innovation, work-life balance, and professional development will help prevent job stagnation and improve staff morale. Additionally, introducing employee

feedback systems and ethical leadership practices will contribute to a sustainable, high-performing workforce and enhance institutional effectiveness in public universities.

Conclusion

Toxic loyalty can drive short-term productivity by coercing employees to stay due to fear, manipulation, or peer pressure. However, fear-based loyalty may initially force compliance but ultimately stifles creativity and innovation. Manipulative loyalty may push employees to work harder in the short term but eventually leads to burnout and dissatisfaction. Exploitative loyalty may extract the best effort from employees temporarily, but prolonged exposure results in disengagement and an intention to leave. Co-dependent loyalty fosters an unhealthy attachment to the organization, limiting professional growth and skill development, and leading to stagnation. Peer-pressured loyalty enforces rigid workplace norms that suppress initiative and independent thought.

Among non-academic staff in public universities in Makurdi, Benue State, these toxic loyalty dimensions contribute to stress, reduced job satisfaction, and inefficiency in service delivery. While toxic loyalty may ensure short-term stability, it ultimately reduces productivity, organizational commitment, and institutional performance. Public universities must shift from coercive loyalty practices to positive policies that encourage long-term employee commitment and performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

i.   University administrators should implement clear policies regarding workload distribution, promotions, and performance evaluations to eliminate manipulative and exploitative loyalty tactics. Fair compensation and recognition for non-academic staff will enhance engagement, reduce burnout, and improve productivity.

ii.   Human resource departments should discourage fear-based loyalty by fostering a psychologically safe workplace where employees feel valued and free to voice concerns. Regular employee feedback sessions, wellness programs, and professional development initiatives will help promote intrinsic motivation and long-term commitment.

iii.   University governing councils should allocate resources for structured welfare programs, including training, mentorship, and career advancement opportunities. This will help reduce co-dependent loyalty and ensure employees remain motivated and productive while promoting career mobility and continuous professional growth.

iv.   Deans, department heads, and supervisors should discourage peer-pressured loyalty by fostering a culture of innovation, flexible work policies, and collaboration. Recognizing individual contributions, providing constructive feedback, and supporting work-life balance initiatives will prevent job stagnation and enhance efficiency.

v.   The Federal and State Governments, along with regulatory bodies, should monitor employment policies in public universities to prevent toxic loyalty practices such as unfair work conditions and job insecurity. Implementing labour laws that protect non-academic staff from workplace exploitation will ensure sustainable productivity and institutional growth.

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