UNDERSTANDING JOB SATISFACTION IN LABOUR-INTENSIVE PLANTATION WORK: EVIDENCE FROM KELANTAN, MALAYSIA

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Abstract. Job satisfaction is a critical factor for organisations as it influences employee performance, commitment, and overall organisational effectiveness. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the influence of compensation, supervision support, and the working environment on job satisfaction among plantation workers. A research framework was developed based on relevant literature to examine the relationships among the selected variables. Social Exchange Theory was employed as the underpinning theory to explain how organisational practices shape employees' attitudes towards their jobs. To empirically test the proposed framework, data were collected using a structured questionnaire survey. A total of 302 respondents from 12 estates in Kelantan were selected through systematic sampling. The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings indicate that compensation and the working environment have a significant influence on job satisfaction. In contrast, supervision support was found to have no significant effect on job satisfaction. The results of this study provide valuable insights for management, highlighting the importance of offering fair compensation and maintaining a conducive working environment in order to enhance job satisfaction among plantation workers. Although supervision support did not show a significant direct effect, however it should not be overlooked, supervision support remains important in implementing organisational policies, improving communication, and ensuring a harmonious workplace, which may indirectly contribute to employees' job satisfaction.
Keywords: *job satisfaction, plantation workers, compensation, supervision support, working environment, social exchange theory*

Introduction

The Malaysian plantation sector, particularly the oil palm industry, plays a vital role in national economic development but continues to experience labour shortages and workforce instability. Plantation employment is labour-intensive, physically demanding, and often conducted in remote estates where workers depend on employer-provided facilities. These structural conditions may significantly shape employees' job satisfaction. Job satisfaction is widely recognised as a determinant of employee retention and organisational performance. However, empirical research focusing specifically on plantation workers in Malaysia remains limited. Previous studies across industries report inconsistent findings regarding the influence of compensation, supervision support, and working environment on job satisfaction, suggesting that contextual factors may alter their relative importance. The palm oil plantation sector is a major contributor to Malaysia's agricultural and economic development, positioning the country among the world's leading producers and exporters of palm oil. The industry contributes significantly to employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas, and supports various downstream sectors including food, cosmetics, and biofuels (MPOB, 2025). Despite its economic importance, the plantation sector continues to face

substantial labour-related challenges, particularly labour shortages, high employee turnover, and heavy dependence on foreign workers. Recent reports indicate that the Malaysian plantation industry is experiencing a shortage of approximately 40,000 workers, affecting operational productivity and long-term sustainability (New Straits Times, 2024). The plantation workforce in Malaysia remains highly dependent on migrant labour, which constitutes a substantial proportion of employees in the sector. This reliance is partly due to the lack of local participation, as plantation work is often perceived by Malaysians as physically demanding, undesirable, and involving poor working conditions (Kozera-Kowalska and Uglis, 2021; Stapa et al., 2019). Consequently, retaining workers has become a major concern for plantation organisations, making job satisfaction an important factor in reducing turnover and strengthening workforce commitment (Hee et al., 2019).

In Malaysia, job satisfaction has increasingly been recognised as a critical determinant of workforce stability in plantation settings. Previous studies reported that factors such as working environment, job stress, organisational support, and social perceptions significantly influence workers' satisfaction and retention. Similarly, international studies conducted in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India suggest that job satisfaction among plantation workers is influenced not only by financial compensation but also by workplace conditions, supervisor support, employee welfare, and social recognition (Akalanka and Mayoshi, 2024). Given the labour-intensive nature of plantation work and the increasing challenges related to labour shortages and retention, understanding the factors influencing job satisfaction has become increasingly important. Therefore, this study examines the relationship between compensation, supervisor support, and working environment on job satisfaction among plantation workers in Kelantan, Malaysia to provide a better understanding of workforce sustainability within the plantation sector. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, this study conceptualises compensation, supervision support, and working environment as organisational exchange resources that influence employees' attitudinal responses. The study aims to examine the relationships between these factors and job satisfaction among plantation workers in Kelantan, and to determine the strongest predictor. By focusing on a labour-intensive plantation context, the study contributes sector-specific evidence to the job satisfaction literature.

Problem statement

Practical gaps

Reports and complaints submitted to the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) between 2022 and 2024 indicate a declining trend in job satisfaction among plantation workers. Major concerns include inadequate compensation, excessive workload, poor working conditions, and insufficient supervisor support. Workers reported dissatisfaction with wages that were perceived as disproportionate to their workload and rising living costs, as well as concerns regarding workplace safety, inadequate housing conditions, limited childcare facilities, and ineffective communication from supervisors. In addition, inconsistencies in overtime payment and limited awareness of employment entitlements further contributed to dissatisfaction among workers. These issues have been associated with broader organisational challenges, including labour shortages and employee turnover, highlighting the urgent

need to improve working conditions, compensation practices, and supervisory support within the plantation sector (NUPW, 2024).

Theoretical gaps

Existing studies on job satisfaction within Malaysia's plantation sector remain limited, as previous research has primarily focused on other industries or plantation settings in different countries (Akalanka and Mayoshi, 2024; Paudel et al., 2024; Soeprapto et al., 2024). Furthermore, prior findings regarding the relationships between compensation, supervisor support, working environment, and job satisfaction have been inconsistent. While some studies reported significant positive relationships, others found insignificant or indirect effects, particularly concerning compensation and supervisor support. Additionally, the application of Social Exchange Theory (SET) within plantation settings remains underexplored despite its extensive use in organisational research. More importantly, limited studies have simultaneously examined compensation, supervisor support, and working environment as determinants of job satisfaction among plantation workers. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the relationships between these organisational factors and job satisfaction within the Malaysian plantation contex.

Literature review

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction refers to employees' overall evaluation of their work experiences and organisational treatment (Judge et al., 2020; Hackman and Oldham, 1976). It encompasses affective and cognitive assessments of employment conditions and has been consistently associated with performance, retention, and organisational commitment (Baxi and Atre, 2024). Conversely, dissatisfaction may lead to disengagement and turnover. In labour-intensive sectors, job satisfaction is often closely linked to tangible employment conditions such as wages, safety, and physical environment. Compared to professional settings where intrinsic motivation may dominate, workers in physically demanding industries may prioritise structural and economic factors. This contextual variation highlights the importance of examining job satisfaction within plantation environments.

Compensation and job satisfaction

Compensation is widely recognised as a core determinant of job satisfaction, as it reflects the economic exchange between employees and organisations (Judge et al., 2020). Perceptions of pay fairness and adequacy influence employees' evaluation of organisational treatment and reciprocity. Empirical findings generally indicate a positive relationship between compensation and job satisfaction across sectors (Rahman et al., 2021). However, inconsistent findings also exist. For instance, some studies report that compensation may become insignificant when other variables such as work-life balance or organisational climate are considered. These mixed results suggest that the impact of compensation may vary across contexts. In plantation settings, where work is physically demanding and income stability is critical, compensation may assume heightened importance. Based on the reviewed literature and theoretical underpinning, the

following hypotheses are proposed: (H1): Compensation has a significant relationship with job satisfaction among plantation workers in Kelantan.

Supervision support and job satisfaction

Supervision support refers to the guidance, fairness, and concern demonstrated by supervisors toward employees (Herawati et al., 2023). Supportive supervision has been associated with improved morale and higher job satisfaction in various industries (Solanki et al., 2021). Nevertheless, contextual differences remain evident. In economically constrained or labour-intensive environments, structural employment conditions may exert a stronger influence on employee outcomes than interpersonal dynamics (Yu et al., 2026; Dumitriu et al., 2025; European Labour Authority, 2024). This suggests that supervision support may not uniformly predict job satisfaction across sectors. Given the structured and task-oriented nature of plantation work, empirical testing is necessary to determine its relevance in this context. Based on the reviewed literature and theoretical underpinning, the following hypotheses are proposed: (H2): Supervision support has a significant relationship with job satisfaction among plantation workers in Kelantan.

Working environment and job satisfaction

The working environment encompasses safety conditions, facilities, infrastructure, and overall employment climate (Donley, 2021). Numerous studies report that conducive working environments enhance job satisfaction and employee performance (Prayudi and Komariyah, 2023). However, prior research also reveals variability. While many studies confirm positive relationships, others indicate that environmental conditions alone may not fully explain satisfaction without considering compensation or supervisory factors (Powrel and Mishra, 2024). These inconsistencies highlight the importance of examining working environment within specific industrial contexts. In plantation settings, environmental conditions extend beyond the immediate job site to include estate housing and facilities, potentially exerting direct influence on employees' daily living experiences. Based on the reviewed literature and theoretical underpinning, the following hypotheses are proposed: (H3): Working environment has a significant relationship with job satisfaction among plantation workers in Kelantan.

To further examine the strongest predictor of job satisfaction among plantation workers in Kelantan, an additional hypothesis is proposed to determine which independent variable demonstrates the greatest influence on job satisfaction. (H4): Which variables (compensation, supervision support and working environment) have most influence towards job satisfaction among plantation workers in Kelantan.

Social exchange theory

Social Exchange Theory posits that employment relationships are governed by reciprocity, whereby employees evaluate organisational rewards relative to their contributions (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). When organisational provisions are perceived as fair and supportive, employees reciprocate through positive attitudes such as job satisfaction. Within this framework, compensation and working environment represent structural exchange resources, while supervision support represents a relational exchange resource. The relative influence of these resources may vary across industrial contexts, particularly in labour-intensive sectors (*Figure 1*).

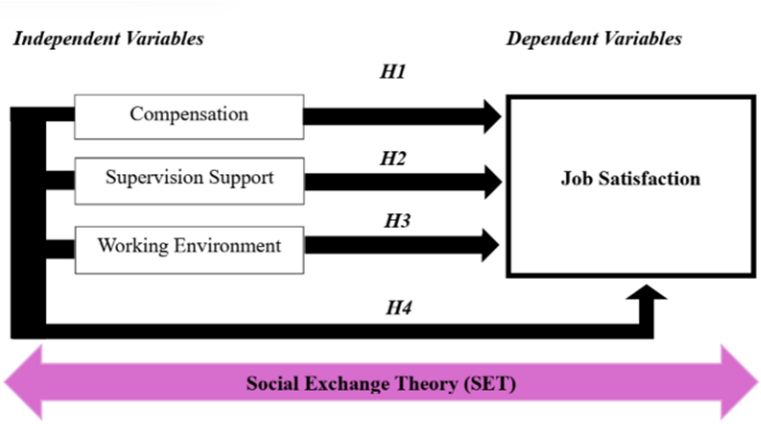


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of the present study.*

Materials and Methods

Research design

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships between compensation, supervision support, working environment, and job satisfaction among plantation workers in Kelantan. A quantitative approach was appropriate as the study aimed to test hypotheses derived from Social Exchange Theory using measurable constructs. The cross-sectional design enabled data collection at a single point in time, capturing employees' current perceptions of organisational practices. Although longitudinal designs may provide stronger causal inference, the cross-sectional approach was considered suitable given time and operational constraints within plantation estates.

Population and sampling

The population comprised plantation workers employed in selected oil palm estates in Kelantan, including both local and foreign workers. The unit of analysis was the individual employee, as job satisfaction represents a personal evaluative construct. A total of 302 usable responses were obtained. The sample size exceeds the minimum requirement for multiple regression involving three predictors, ensuring adequate statistical power and stable parameter estimation. Systematic sampling was employed based on workforce lists provided at the estate level. Respondents were required to be currently employed to evaluate compensation, supervision, and environmental conditions meaningfully. Systematic sampling was employed because it provides a practical and efficient method for selecting respondents from a well-defined population while ensuring a representative distribution across the sampling frame. The technique reduces selection bias, is straightforward to implement, and is particularly appropriate when a complete list of the population is available and the population is relatively homogeneous (Saunders et al., 2023; Sekaran and Bougie, 2020).

Research instrument

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire consisting of five sections: demographic information, compensation, supervision support, working environment, and job satisfaction. All items were measured using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). The six-point scale was selected to eliminate a neutral midpoint and encourage more definitive responses. Measurement items were adapted from established organisational behaviour literature and contextualised to reflect plantation-specific conditions. Compensation assessed wage adequacy and fairness, supervision support measured clarity, fairness, and concern from supervisors, working environment evaluated safety and facilities and job satisfaction captured overall employment contentment.

Pilot test and reliability

A pilot study was conducted prior to full data collection to assess the reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. No items were removed.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to summarise respondent characteristics and variable distributions. Pearson correlation analysis examined the strength and direction of relationships between independent variables and job satisfaction. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the relative influence of compensation, supervision support, and working environment on job satisfaction.

Results and Discussion

The empirical findings derived from statistical analyses conducted to examine the relationships between compensation, supervision support, working environment, and job satisfaction among plantation workers in Kelantan. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses were employed.

Respondent profile

A total of 302 respondents participated in the study. The sample was gender-balanced (50.7% male; 49.3% female). The majority were Malay (78.1%) and full-time employees (99.3%). Most respondents were aged between 31 and 50 years (65.9%) and reported tenure exceeding six years (62.3%), indicating a mature and experienced workforce. The demographic distribution suggests that the findings reflect perceptions of stable and long-serving plantation employees.

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of all study variables. All variables recorded relatively high mean values, indicating generally positive perceptions among respondents. Working environment and job satisfaction share the highest mean scores (4.48), suggesting strong satisfaction with environmental conditions and overall employment experience. Standard deviation values below 1.0 indicate limited dispersion and consistent responses.

***Table 1**. Descriptive statistics.*

Variable	Mean	SD
Working Environment	4.48	0.89
Job Satisfaction	4.48	0.90
Compensation	4.34	0.87
Supervision Support	3.22	0.67

Correlation analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to test H1, H2, and H3. Compensation demonstrates a very strong positive relationship with job satisfaction (r = 0.892), supporting H1. Working environment shows an extremely strong positive relationship (r = 0.954), supporting H3. In contrast, supervision support exhibits a very weak negative relationship (r = –0.050), indicating no significant association and leading to rejection of H2. These findings suggest that structural employment conditions are more strongly associated with job satisfaction than supervisory dynamics (*Table 2*).

***Table 2**. Correlation analysis.*

Variable	Job Satisfaction	Result
Compensation	0.892*	Accepted
Supervision Support	-0.050	Rejected
Working Environment	0.954*	Accepted

*Note: *Significant at p < .05.*

Multiple regression analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the strongest predictor of job satisfaction (H4). Working environment emerges as the strongest predictor of job satisfaction (β = .761), followed by compensation (β = .219). Supervision support does not demonstrate significant influence. Therefore, H4 is supported, indicating that working environment exerts the greatest explanatory power in predicting job satisfaction among plantation workers (*Table 3*).

***Table 3**. Multiple regression results.*

Predictor	Beta	t
Compensation	.219	6.26
Working Environment	.761	21.8
Supervision Support	-.073	-.457

The findings indicate that compensation and working environment significantly influence job satisfaction among plantation workers, while supervisor support does not demonstrate a significant relationship. In particular, the working environment emerged as the strongest predictor of job satisfaction, followed by compensation, suggesting that plantation workers place greater importance on tangible workplace conditions and financial rewards than interpersonal supervisory relationships. These findings highlight the importance of structural employment conditions in shaping job satisfaction within labour-intensive plantation settings. The significant relationship between compensation and job satisfaction is consistent with previous studies that emphasise fair wages, incentives, and benefits as important determinants of employees' satisfaction and organisational commitment (Rahman et al., 2021). In plantation settings, where employees often face physically demanding work and financial pressures, compensation serves as a form of organisational recognition and support. This finding also aligns with

Social Exchange Theory (SET), which suggests that employees tend to reciprocate favourable organisational treatment with positive attitudes, including greater job satisfaction (Blau, 1964).

Similarly, the working environment was found to significantly influence job satisfaction and emerged as the strongest predictor among the studied variables. This finding supports prior studies indicating that safe working conditions, adequate facilities, and supportive workplace environments are essential determinants of employee satisfaction, particularly in physically demanding sectors. Given the labour-intensive nature of plantation work, workers are more likely to experience higher job satisfaction when workplace conditions support their safety, wellbeing, and productivity. Consistent with SET, a supportive work environment may also signal organisational concern for employees, thereby strengthening positive work attitudes. In contrast, supervisor support did not significantly influence job satisfaction, suggesting that supervisory relationships may be less influential in plantation settings compared to compensation and workplace conditions. This finding may reflect contextual issues, including ineffective communication, harsh supervisory practices, and limited organisational support perceived by workers. The result is consistent with previous studies reporting mixed or non-significant relationships between supervisor support and job satisfaction in labour-intensive sectors. The finding also suggests contextual limitations of SET, whereby supportive exchanges may be weakened when employees prioritise financial security and working conditions over interpersonal relationships.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes theoretically by examining the relationships between compensation, supervisor support, working environment, and job satisfaction within the plantation sector, thereby extending job satisfaction literature to a labour-intensive agricultural context. The findings indicate that compensation and working environment significantly influence job satisfaction, whereas supervisor support does not demonstrate a significant direct relationship. These results suggest that structural employment factors, particularly tangible rewards and workplace conditions, may exert stronger influence than interpersonal supervisory relationships in physically demanding and economically uncertain work environments. Furthermore, this study provides contextual support for Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964), which posits that employees reciprocate favourable organisational treatment with positive attitudes. In this study, compensation and working environment function as key organisational resources that signal concern for employees' welfare, thereby enhancing job satisfaction. Conversely, the non-significant influence of supervisor support highlights potential contextual limitations of SET in plantation settings, where workers may prioritise material and environmental conditions over supervisory interactions. Overall, the study enriches the literature by providing empirical evidence from the Malaysian plantation sector, an area that remains relatively underexplored.

Practical implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for plantation management and policymakers in improving job satisfaction among plantation workers. First, the significant relationship between compensation and job satisfaction highlights the importance of fair and competitive compensation systems. Plantation organisations

should ensure transparent and equitable wages, incentives, and allowances to enhance employees' motivation, commitment, and retention. Second, the working environment emerged as a significant determinant of job satisfaction, emphasising the need to improve workplace safety, facilities, equipment adequacy, and overall working conditions. Given the physically demanding nature of plantation work, investments in supportive workplace environments may reduce stress and enhance workers' wellbeing. Although supervisor support did not demonstrate a significant direct effect on job satisfaction, this finding does not diminish its importance. Instead, it suggests that supervisory practices alone may be insufficient without fair compensation and conducive working conditions. Plantation management should therefore strengthen supervisory practices through respectful communication, ethical leadership, and greater awareness of workers' welfare. Overall, plantation organisations are encouraged to adopt a holistic approach by simultaneously improving compensation, workplace conditions, and supervisory quality to achieve sustainable improvements in employee satisfaction and wellbeing.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, this research focuses exclusively on plantation workers within a specific geographical context in Malaysia. Consequently, the generalisability of the findings to plantation workers in other regions or different agricultural sectors may be limited. Future studies are therefore encouraged to include respondents from various geographical locations or conduct comparative analyses across different agricultural industries to improve the broader applicability of the findings. Secondly, this study adopts a cross-sectional research design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between the variables examined. Since data were collected at a single point in time, the findings only reflect the existing relationships among compensation, supervisor support, working environment, and job satisfaction during the study period. Future researchers are encouraged to employ longitudinal or mixed-method research approaches to obtain deeper insights into how changes in organisational factors may influence job satisfaction over time. Thirdly, the present study primarily focuses on the direct relationships between organisational factors and job satisfaction. Future research may consider examining potential mediating or moderating variables, such as employee engagement, organisational commitment, work stress, or job motivation, to further explain the underlying mechanisms through which organisational factors affect employees' job satisfaction. Such investigations may provide a more comprehensive understanding of employee behaviour and workplace outcomes within the plantation sector.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the organisational factors influencing job satisfaction among plantation workers in Malaysia. Job satisfaction remains a crucial aspect within the plantation industry due to its significant influence on employees' motivation, productivity, work performance, and long-term retention in a labour-intensive work environment. In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing literature on job satisfaction by simultaneously investigating the effects of compensation, supervisor support, and the working environment within the plantation

context. The findings demonstrate that compensation and the working environment exhibit a significant positive relationship with job satisfaction, whereas supervisor support does not have a statistically significant direct effect. Furthermore, the findings provide empirical support for Social Exchange Theory (SET) by illustrating that plantation workers are more likely to develop positive work attitudes when they perceive favourable organisational treatment through equitable compensation and a supportive working environment. These findings reinforce the theoretical proposition that employees tend to reciprocate beneficial organisational practices with positive attitudes, including increased job satisfaction. Overall, this study suggests that plantation organisations may enhance employees' job satisfaction by prioritising fair compensation systems, improving workplace conditions, and strengthening supervisory practices in ways that complement broader organisational support mechanisms. Such efforts are essential in fostering a more satisfied, motivated, and productive workforce within the plantation sector.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involving any parties in this research study.

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