The Effect of Stress as a Mediator in the Relationship Between Antecedents and Employee Misconduct in the Royal Malaysian Police

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ABSTRACT

Employee misconduct (EM) is a significant issue in law enforcement agencies, where officers may exploit their authority for personal gain. Grounded in the General Strain Theory (GST), General Theory of Crime (GTC) and Fraud Triangle Theory (FTT), this study aims to investigate the role of stress as a mediating factor between various antecedents (self-control, integrity, organizational justice, politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle) and EM, specifically within the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP). Data was gathered through two structured questionnaires administered to both employees and their supervisors using a quantitative research design. A total of 428 police officers from Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Johor, Perak, and Sabah participated in the study. The findings show that self-control, organizational justice, salary, and financial pressure significantly influence stress and EM, while integrity, organizational politics, and lifestyle do not. Furthermore, stress was found to partially mediate the relationship between these antecedents (self-control, organizational justice, salary, financial pressure) and EM. This study is the first to explore the mediating effect of stress on EM within a Malaysian law enforcement context, and the integration of individual, organizational, and socio-economic factors into a unified model represents a novel contribution to the study of misconduct in law enforcement agencies.

JEL Classification: D23, K42

Keywords: Antecedents; employee misconduct; law enforcement; stress

INTRODUCTION

Employee misconduct within law enforcement agencies, including the Royal Malaysian Police (RMP), has garnered significant attention due to its detrimental impact on public trust and the integrity of the institution. Porter (2021) claims that one of the biggest problems facing police agencies worldwide is police officer misconduct. In Malaysia, the problem of police officer misconduct is at a serious level, with allegations of lying, drug abuse, power abuse, authority misuse, excessive force, and stealing (Berita Harian Online, 2019). The media has a great deal focused on these issues that have recently been brought up about police behavior in Malaysia. For example, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has arrested three more cops for bribery allegations of receiving bribes of between RM20,000 and RM50,000 monthly and is estimated to have received more than RM1 million from 2017 to 2022 (The Star Online, 2023).

Misconduct within law enforcement not only tarnishes the reputation of the agencies involved but also undermines the criminal justice system, the government, and society as a whole. The law enforcement agencies that are commonly associated with misconduct, corruption and abuse of power are the RMP (Azrae et al., 2018). In Malaysia, there is an increasing and consistent complaint by the public about police misconduct. Public complaints of police misconduct have preceded any other law enforcement agencies. According to the Enforcement Agency Integrity Commission (EAIC), statistics in Table 1 reported that RMP received the highest number of complaints (73.23% or 3,100 cases) over the past five years (2018 to 2022), which has been the highest in a decade (EAIC, 2023). Besides, a total of 40,436 disciplinary inquiry papers and investigation papers were opened by the Integrity and Compliance Standard Department (JIPS) over the past ten years from 2014 to June 2024 (Bernama, 2024), highlighting the urgency of identifying the root causes of police misconduct.

Table 1 Total Registered Complaints Received by the Enforcement Agency Integrity Commission (EAIC) (2018 to 2022)

Agencies	Years					Total	Percent
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022		
Royal Malaysian Police	440	477	742	699	742	**3,100**	**73.23**
Immigration Dept. of Malaysia	20	38	57	61	41	**217**	**5.13**
Road Transport Dept.	13	9	28	37	20	**107**	**2.53**
Ministry of Domestic Trade, Co-Operatives and Consumerism	17	9	16	10	14	**66**	**1.56**
Royal Customs Dept. of Malaysia	8	11	16	18	22	**75**	**1.77**
National Registration Dept.	7	11	9	12	3	**42**	**0.99**
Ministry of Housing and Local Government (Enforcement Div)	3	3	13	19	9	**47**	**1.11**
Ministry of Health (Enforcement Division)	4	0	4	9	5	**22**	**0.52**
Dept. of Environment	5	2	5	8	6	**26**	**0.61**
Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency	2	1	5	5	5	**18**	**0.43**
National Anti-Drugs Agency	5	5	10	11	13	**44**	**1.04**
Malaysian Volunteer Corps Department (RELA)	1	1	3	7	12	**24**	**0.57**
Labor Dept.	7	6	9	11	8	**41**	**0.97**
Industrial Relations Dept.	0	1	1	4	1	**7**	**0.17**
Dept. of Occupational Safety and Health	4	3	0	4	0	**11**	**0.26**
Dept. of Fisheries	3	0	0	1	1	**5**	**0.12**
Ministry of Tourism (Enforcement Unit)	0	0	6	7	0	**13**	**0.31**
Civil Aviation Authority Dept.	1	0	0	1	0	**2**	**0.05**
Dept. of Wildlife and National Parks	0	1	0	2	4	**7**	**0.17**
LPKP (Sabah and Sarawak)	0	0	0	2	0	**2**	**0.05**
Agencies Outside Jurisdiction	5	1	53	135	155	**349**	**8.24**
Total	**545**	**579**	**977**	**1,066**	**1,066**	**4,233**	**100.00**

Source: EAIC (2023)

Furthermore, Table 2 presents the statistics of disciplinary actions taken against police officers in Malaysia from 2020 to 2023, with 5,669 cases recorded. Notably, integrity-related offenses are the most prevalent, comprising 87.5% of all cases. The data reveals an inconsistent trend in disciplinary actions, with fluctuations in the number of cases each year. For instance, there was a decrease of 113 cases (7.3%) from 2020 to 2021, followed by an increase of 40 cases (2.8%) in 2022. This inconsistency suggests that while efforts to address misconduct may exist, they are not yielding consistent improvements. Therefore, there is a crucial need for effective interventions to address and mitigate employee misconduct within the police force. Hence, it is important to investigate factors contributing to EM among police officers, which serve as the primary basis for this study. The results of this research will assist RMP policymakers in determining the underlying causes of the problem of police misconduct, formulating a thorough and all-encompassing plan to

address problem officers, lowering the frequency of misbehavior, and mending or restoring relationships between the police and the community (Donner et al., 2016).

Table 2 Statistics of Disciplinary Actions Toward Police Officers (Year 2020 to 2023)

Types of Offences	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total	Percent
Integrity	1,393	1,253	1,256	1,062	4,964	87.5%
Criminal	22	23	50	17	140	2.5%
Corruption	8	18	19	12	57	1%
Drug Abuse	77	84	102	87	350	6.2%
Syariah	39	48	39	32	158	2.8%
Total	**1,539**	**1,426**	**1,466**	**1,238**	**5,669**	**100%**

Source: RMP (2024)

In a meta-analysis, Hershcovis et al. (2007) and Narayanan and Murphy (2017) identified that individual and situational factors have a direct effect on EM. However, existing studies have examined antecedents (individual, organizational, and environmental factors) and misconduct separately without considering their interconnectedness within a unified theoretical framework (Alias et al., 2013; Cox et al., 2022; Donner and Jennings, 2014; Donner et al., 2016; Nasurdin et al., 2014; Teh et al., 2023; Wolfe and Piquero, 2011). This study aims to bridge the gap by exploring the mediating effect of stress on the correlation between antecedents (self-control, integrity, organizational justice, organizational politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle) and EM among police officers within a comprehensive model.

Stress is a critical factor in the engagement of law enforcement officers in EM, as it can lead to illegal behavior and a negative attitude toward work (Ahmad et al., 2017; Spector and Fox, 2005). While prior research has established a strong correlation between job stress and police misconduct (Bishopp et al., 2016, 2020; Cox et al., 2022; Lawson et al., 2021; Wu and Makin, 2021), there has been limited investigation into the role of stress as a mediator in the relationship between antecedents and EM (Bashir et al., 2019; Nasurdin et al., 2014; Vigoda, 2002). The unique organizational culture, hierarchical structure, and job demands in law enforcement settings may differ significantly from those in other industries, making it crucial to examine these dynamics in a context-specific manner.

Moreover, most studies on EM have been conducted in Western countries characterized by high levels of individualism (Hofstede, 1983), such as the United States and the United Kingdom, which may affect the relationships between antecedents, stress, and EM (Khattak et al., 2020; Nasurdin et al., 2014). Given the cultural differences, additional research is needed to validate these findings in non-Western contexts, particularly in Malaysia, a country with a strongly collectivist culture and high power distance (Hofstede, 1983).

This study seeks to contribute significantly to the theoretical understanding of organizational behavior and misconduct by examining the mediating role of stress in EM. It extends existing frameworks (Bishopp et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2022; Donner et al., 2016; Lawson et al., 2021; Wu and Makin, 2021) by incorporating stress as a crucial factor in understanding the relationship between antecedents and misconduct. Furthermore, the study validates the General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992) by empirically testing the proposed model within a law enforcement context. Additionally, this study employs a non-self-report methodology to measure misconduct, avoiding biased responses from supervisor raters, which has been a limitation in previous research (Donner and Jennings, 2014; Donner et al., 2016; Martin, 1994; Son and Rome, 2004).

By focusing on the RMP, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the role of stress in mediating the relationship between antecedents and EM in a law enforcement context, offering evidence that can inform strategies to mitigate misconduct and improve the integrity of police forces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employee Misconduct (EM)

Employee misconduct (EM) refers to various harmful behaviors that negatively impact an organization, including illegal acts, transgressions of norms, legal actions that go against the law, and counterproductive behaviors (Visvanathan and Kunapalan, 2020). According to Aminuddin (2013, p. 250), EM has been defined as the "improper behavior, intentional wrongdoing or deliberate violation of a rule or standard of behavior at

the workplace." It is defined as the failure to uphold the terms of employment in the service contract, such as dishonesty, immoral behavior, or absenteeism. EM is the most common reason for termination and has three subheadings: misconduct linked to immorality, misconduct related to discipline, and misbehavior related to duty.

Stress

Stress is defined as a state of tension arising from a demand for adjustment or adaptive behavior (Olsen et al., 1989). Baum et al. (1981) describe stress as external forces endangering an organism's life and well-being. Job stress is detrimental physical and psychological reactions when an employee's requirements do not align with their job demands. Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory (GST) defines strain as situations where positive or valued stimuli are eliminated or threatened. Negative emotional states can lead to deviant behaviors, ranging from minor to serious misconduct (Agnew, 1992).

GST is applied as a theoretical framework to understand the impact of stress on employees and the misconduct behaviors that emerge from it (Agnew, 1992). Stressors, such as job circumstances, surroundings, and personality, contribute to stress and can lead to deviant behavior. Stressors arise from the work environment, and the GST suggests that pressures and strain are linked to employees' emotional states, leading to destructive behavior. The GST is helpful in explaining the connection between a stressed-out person's engagement in deviant behavior and themselves, and it is proposed that stress acts as a mediator on the association between antecedents and employee misconduct. This study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of EM and its impact on employees' behavior and well-being. Therefore, this study proposed that stress is a mediator in the association between antecedents and employee misconduct.

Antecedents of Stress and Employee Misconduct (EM)

This study used theoretical and empirical evidence to select key constructs and variables, focusing on individual, organizational, and socio-economic factors. The framework was based on self-control, integrity, organizational justice, and politics, while socio-economic factors included salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle.

Self-control, Stress and EM

Self-control refers to an individual's ability to regulate their own behavior, emotions, and desires in the face of external demands (Khasif et al., 2020) and is a crucial factor in influencing EM among law enforcement officers (Donner et al., 2016; Donner and Jennings, 2014). Restubog et al. (2010) described self-control as *"...the ability to override one's impulses and resist external influences"*. Research has shown a negative correlation between self-control and employee misconduct, with low self-control individuals more likely to engage in criminal activities (Bobbio et al., 2018; Choi and Kruis, 2020; Donner and Jennings, 2014; Donner et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021). For example, a study conducted by Donner et al. (2016) revealed a negative correlation between police misconduct and self-control among first-line police supervisors in the United States.

Studies have also shown that self-control is associated with stress, with trait self-control being negatively related to stress (Baldwin et al., 2018; Boals et al., 2011; Hofmann et al., 2014; Nielsen et al., 2020). According to Nielsen et al. (2020), using self-reported rater among 4,097 students in Germany, Poland, Sweden and the United States showed that trait self-control was negatively related to stress. This is because individuals with strong self-control handle stressful situations more skillfully by choosing to interact in more encouraging social settings and using efficient regulating techniques. This aligns with Gottfredson and Hirschi's General Theory of Crime (GTC), which suggests that individuals with low self-control are more likely to engage in criminal activities. Overall, self-control plays a significant role in influencing EM and promoting a healthy work-life balance. Therefore, based on the discussions, the following hypotheses are formed.

H1a: There is a negative relationship between self-control and EM.
H2a: There is a negative relationship between self-control and stress.

Integrity, Stress and EM

Integrity is a character strength and a fundamental human quality that is essential for successful organizational operations in the modern world (Swanepoel, 2012). Killinger (2010) defined integrity as "an individual's quality of being honest, having strong moral principles, moral uprightness and it depends on oneself to uphold oneself to consistent moral and ethical standards." Studies have shown a significant negative correlation between integrity and EM (Hunter, 2014; Van Staden, 2018; Swanepoel, 2012). For example, Van Staden (2018) found that there is a negative correlation between integrity and counterproductive work behavior, suggesting that individuals with high integrity levels are less likely to engage in unethical activities at work. Conversely, individuals with low integrity are more likely to steal in less risky situations.

Furthermore, integrity is negatively related to stress (McIntosh and Sheppy, 2013; Prottas, 2013; Swanepoel, 2012). For instance, Prottas (2013) reported that behavioral integrity had a negative correlation with stress among US workers. Thus, individuals with low integrity will have high stress levels. Therefore, managing and reducing stress levels is crucial for maintaining and promoting integrity in the workplace (McIntosh and Sheppy, 2013). Overall, integrity is a crucial factor in ensuring a positive work environment and promoting ethical behavior. Therefore, based on the discussions, the following hypotheses are formed.

H1b: There is a negative relationship between integrity and EM.
H2b: There is a negative relationship between integrity and stress.

Organizational Justice, Stress and EM

Organizational justice refers to the perceived fairness in the workplace, encompassing distributive (fairness of outcomes), procedural (fairness of processes), and interactional (fairness in interpersonal treatment) dimensions (Colquitt et al., 2013; Greenberg, 1990). Previous study shows that organizational justice has a significantly negative correlation with EM (Abbasi et al., 2020; Alias and Rasdi, 2015; Colquitt et al., 2006; Fridell et al., 2021; Khattak et al., 2020; Wolfe and Piquero, 2011). Research by Fridell et al. (2021) found that organizational justice was negatively correlated with police misconduct. Thus, police officers who perceive respect, a voice in decision-making, fair internal processes, and fair outcomes are less likely to commit misconduct. This finding aligns with the Social Exchange Theory (SET), which suggests that people form exchange connections based on their interactions with others (Blau, 1964; Khattak et al., 2020).

Additionally, previous research has shown a negative and significant relationship between organizational justice and stress, with low perceptions of organizational justice in the workplace leading to significantly higher stress levels (Elechi et al., 2020; Lambert et al., 2019; May et al., 2020; Singh and Basu, 2022). For example, Singh and Basu's (2022) study among police officers in Indian states' police forces showed a negative correlation between organizational justice and occupational stress. This highlights the importance of fostering fairness in the workplace so that employees feel valued and motivated. Therefore, based on the discussions, the following hypotheses are formed.

H1c: There is a negative relationship between organizational justice and EM.
H2c: There is a negative relationship between organizational justice and stress.

Organizational Politics, Stress and EM

Organizational politics refers to socially influencing behaviors designed to maximize self-interest or self-serving behavior, disregarding the welfare of others within an organization (Ferris et al., 1994; Kacmar and Baron, 1999). Research has shown a positive relationship between organizational politics and workplace misbehavior (Bashir et al., 2019; Crawford et al., 2019; De Clercq and Pareira, 2024; Khattak et al., 2020; Meisler et al., 2019; Nasurdin et al., 2014; Ugwu et al., 2023). For example, a study conducted by Crawford et al. (2019) on workers from a state government agency revealed a positive and significant correlation between organizational politics and deviant behavior. Thus, workers who encounter workplace politics often engage in deviant conduct, such as making rude remarks or making fun of others. This finding aligns with the SET, which suggests that negative perceptions of an organization lead to abnormal behavior (Blau, 1964).

The impact of organizational politics on job stress has also been studied (Bashir et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2024; Nasurdin et al., 2014; Vigoda, 2002). For instance, Khan et al. (2024) found a strong positive correlation between organizational politics and job stress among employees in Pakistani public and private sectors, with employees with higher perceptions of organizational politics in their workplace experiencing significantly higher stress levels. Therefore, based on the discussions, the following hypotheses are formed.

H1d: There is a positive relationship between organizational politics and EM.
H2d: There is a positive relationship between organizational politics and stress.

Salary, Stress and EM

Salary has been defined as pay given to employees who are exempt from regulations of the Fair Labor Standards Act and, hence, do not receive overtime pay (e.g., managers and professionals). Exempt pay is calculated at an annual or monthly rate rather than hourly (Milkovich et al., 2011). Van Rijckeghem and Weder (2001) argued that there is a negative correlation between the amount of civil service salary and corruption cases and that civil workers who receive little pay are more susceptible to illegal rent-seeking. Furthermore, it's possible that the notion of inadequate compensation will lessen the moral costs associated with corruption (Abbink, 2000). Furthermore, a study by Wells (2001) discovered that employees who are happy in their professions are less likely to participate in criminal activity, such as theft and fraud. Greenberg (1990, 1993) observed that certain types of theft are associated with lower pay and underpayment for the labor that the employee performs.

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2021) study found that people were stressed at the workplace due to several reasons. The three major factors causing stress were low salaries (56%), long hours (54%), and lack of growth opportunities (52%). Hadi et al. (2023) conducted a study in the Food and Beverage hotel sector and found that the emotional exhaustion of hotel food and beverage staff is significantly impacted by low pay. On the other hand, research conducted by Marlow et al. (1996) found that low salary creates stress among teachers in educational institutions. Therefore, based on the discussions, the following hypotheses are formed.

H1e: There is a negative relationship between salary and EM.
H2e: There is a negative relationship between salary and stress.

Financial pressure, Stress and EM

Financial pressure is a condition where an individual struggles to maintain a reasonable standard of living due to insufficient financial resources to meet basic needs (Ting, 2016; Yates, 2007). It includes aspects like assets, income, debts, and money management. This pressure has been linked to employee misbehavior and work-related consequences like asset theft and fraud (Hasnan et al., 2013; Said et al., 2017; Said et al., 2018b). The Fraud Triangle Theory (FTT) (Cressey, 1953) suggests that the pressure to commit fraud stems from internal factors. For instance, according to Yusrianti et al. (2020) and Albrecht et al. (2018), financial pressure is the primary reason for fraud.

Additionally, financial problems are a major source of stress, with financial strain causing work stress linked to organizations lacking a benefits package or salary that doesn't reflect the effort invested (Bhui et al., 2016; Joo and Garman, 1998; Ozyuksel, 2022). Bailey et al. (1998) conducted a study among hospital staff and found a positive correlation between financial strain and work-related stress. High levels of financial pressure can manifest as physical symptoms like anxiety, migraines, high blood pressure, and depression. Therefore, based on the discussions, the following hypotheses are formed.

H1f: There is a positive relationship between financial pressure and EM.
H2f: There is a positive relationship between financial pressure and stress.

Lifestyle, Stress and EM

Lifestyle is defined as a person's pattern of living, expressed through activities, interests, and opinions (Kotler and Keller, 2009). In this study, lifestyle is viewed as based on a luxury lifestyle. The Malaysian Anti-

Corruption Commission (MACC) identified four main reasons for public service officers engaging in misconduct and corruption: lifestyle beyond means, greed, conducive opportunities, and low integrity (MACC Portal, 2020). Fraud Triangle Theory (FTT) (Cressey, 1950) suggests that any crime has a motive, such as addiction, maintaining lifestyle, personal debt, or revenge (Ernst and Young, 2016). Prabowo (2023) argued that the act of engaging in excessive consumption is also associated with cases of money laundering offenses that are connected to corruption and several other illicit activities. The lifestyle of corrupt individuals is one of the primary behavioral concerns associated with corruption, as "living beyond means" is the most common behavioral red flag among occupational fraud offenders worldwide (Prabowo, 2023).

Limited empirical studies have examined the relationship between lifestyle and stress. Psychosocial stress at work has been associated with unhealthy lifestyle factors like smoking, heavy alcohol consumption, physical inactivity, and obesity (Heikkila et al., 2013). However, longitudinal analyses suggest no straightforward cause-effect relationship between work-related stress and lifestyle. Buhr's (2012) study found that workplace stress variables have a small effect on unhealthy lifestyle choices, suggesting that employees who spend more money on a luxury lifestyle perceive significantly higher stress levels. Therefore, based on the discussions, the following hypotheses are formed.

H1g: There is a positive relationship between lifestyle and EM.
H2g: There is a positive relationship between lifestyle and stress.

Stress and EM

Previous research has shown a strong correlation between stress and EM (Adekanmbi and Ukpere, 2019; Bashir et al., 2019; Lawson et al., 2021; Nasurdin et al., 2014), with studies showing a positive correlation between workload and police misconduct. Lawson et al. (2021) found stronger support for misconduct among officers in jurisdictions dealing with more violent crime and workload-related demands. Nasurdin et al. (2014) found that stress positively impacts deviant behavior in Malaysian manufacturing firms, leading to tense and impulsive behavior. Therefore, based on the discussions, the following hypotheses are formed.

H3: There is a positive relationship between stress and EM.

Stress as a mediator variable

This study suggests that stress plays a mediating role in the relationship between antecedents (self-control, integrity, organizational justice, organizational politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle) and EM, in line with the General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992) and the Stressors-Emotion Model (Spector and Fox, 2005). Stress is influenced by both individual and organizational characteristics and socio-economic factors, such as self-control, integrity, organizational justice, organizational politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle. The study aims to explain why people's levels of self-control, integrity, organizational justice, organizational politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle indirectly predict EM in relation to stress. The GST states that under stress, individuals experience negative emotions, which put internal pressure on them to respond (Agnew, 1992). Nasurdin et al. (2014) conducted a study among production workers in Malaysia and found that stress mediates the relationship between organizational politics and organizational justice (distributive and procedural), which both influence misconduct behavior.

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), the study is subject to four conditions: (a) self-control, integrity, organizational justice, organizational politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle are valid predictors of EM; (b) self-control, integrity, organizational justice, organizational politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle are related to stress; and (c) stress is related to EM; (d) when the mediator is under control, the impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable (EM) decreases. The study expects to find a significant mediating role of stress between antecedents and employee misconduct. Therefore, based on the discussions, the following hypotheses are formed.

H4   Stress mediates the relationship between antecedents (self-control, integrity, organizational justice, organizational politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle) and EM.
H4a: Stress mediates the relationship between self-control and EM.
H4b: Stress mediates the relationship between integrity and EM.

H4c: Stress mediates the relationship between organizational justice and EM.
H4d: Stress mediates the relationship between organizational politics and EM.
H4e: Stress mediates the relationship between salary and EM.
H4f: Stress mediates the relationship between financial pressure and EM.
H4g: Stress mediates the relationship between lifestyle and EM.

The previous discussion leads to the derivation of the theoretical framework for measuring EM among enforcement officers in Malaysia (see Figure 1). This proposed conceptual framework is constructed based on three theories and one model, namely the Agnew (1992) General Strain Theory (GST), Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) General Theory of Crime (GTC), Cressey's (1953) Fraud Triangle Theory (FTT) and Stressors-Emotion Model (Spector and Fox, 2005). The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the Agnew (1992) General Strain Theory (GST), which posits that stress arises when individuals experience strain or pressure from various sources, leading them to engage in deviant behavior as a coping mechanism. Bishopp et al. (2020) argue that one of the most promising frameworks that has been used to understand police stress is Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory (GST).

Specifically, the proposed conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates the direct relationship between individual factors (self-control and integrity), organizational factors (organizational justice and organizational politics), socio-economics factors (salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle), stress and EM. The indirect path relationship explains the mediating effect of stress on the relationship between antecedents and EM.
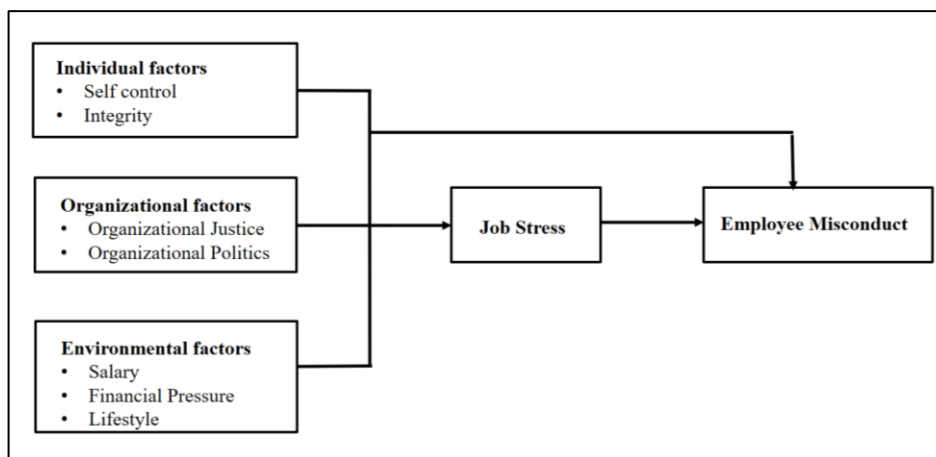

Figure 1 Research framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample and Sampling Procedures

This study applied a quantitative approach using a questionnaire to study the role of stress as a mediating factor in the relationship between antecedents and EM among law enforcement officers in Malaysia. The study involved police officers from Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Johor, Perak, and Sabah. Data was collected using two-stage multistage cluster sampling methods, dividing the 14 police states into four regions (west, east, north and south) and selecting five out of them. Two police districts were purposively selected in each state. This technique is used for large-scale surveys spread over large areas (Kabir, 2016). The multistage cluster sampling technique selects samples randomly, and it can eliminate selection bias (Brown, 2010). This study uses a cross-sectional survey and a simple random sampling technique to collect data from respondents. A two-wave questionnaire was distributed to 500 officers and 500 supervisors to avoid common method bias and to fulfill this study sample size of 500 (as suggested by Hair et al., 2019). The data was collected using two sets of questionnaires: Questionnaire Set A is completed by the employees using a self-administered questionnaire, and Questionnaire Set B is completed by the supervisors via online "Google Form." A total of 450 pairs of matched employee-supervisor surveys were responded to. At the same time, 22 incomplete questionnaires and 428 filled questionnaires can be used for further analysis, which yielded a response rate of

82%. The sample size of 450 meets many researchers' recommendations and agrees that the suggested sample size should be between 250 and 500 for SEM analysis (Schumacker and Lomax, 2016; Sekaran and Bougie, 2016; Kline, 2016; Rashid et al., 2021).

Measurement

This study used instruments from Western countries, modified for the Malaysian context, and translated into the Malaysian language through back-to-back translations. A total of 68 items were adapted from past studies to measure the nine variables in this study. This study applied the five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5), to measure the studied variables, except for the EM scale, which ranged from Never (1) to Daily (5). The sources of questionnaire formation are shown in Table 3. A pilot study on a group of 35 police officers was conducted to improve the validity and reliability of the instrument. The Cronbach alpha reliability for all constructs ranges from 0.77 to 0.91 and meets the minimum value of 0.60 (Nunally, 1978).

Table 3 Source of questionnaire formation

Constructs	Number of Items	Adapted from	Cronbach's alpha
Self-control	13	Tangney et al. (2004)	0.87
Integrity	8	Peterson and Seligman (2004)	0.88
Organizational Justice	5	Reynolds and Helfers (2019)	0.88
Organizational Politics	6	Vigoda (2002)	0.91
Salary	6	Khalid (2016)	0.91
Financial Pressure	7	Said et al. (2018b)	0.91
Lifestyle	4	Daud et al. (2019) and Said et al. (2018a)	0.78
Stress	4	Motowidlo, et al. (1986)	0.90
Employee Misconduct	15	Martin (1994), Bennett and Robinson (2000) and Vardi (2001)	0.77

Data Analysis

Structural equation models (SEM) are used with the help of the Amos 23.0 program to test the hypothesis. Chi-square statistics, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis's index (TLI), normed fit index (NFI), and relative chi-square ($\chi2$ /df) are used to assess the goodness of the fit model. Hair et al. (2019) state that a score above 0.90 for CFI, TLI, and NFI indicates a good fit. For RMSEA, a score less than 0.08 indicates a good fit (Hair et al., 2019). The relative chi-square ($\chi2$/df) below the cut-off value 5.0 indicates a good fit (Bentler, 1990). This study was conducted using the Bootstrapping procedure introduced by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to test the mediation effect.

RESULTS

Background of Respondents

The descriptive analysis shows that 80% (343) were males and 20% (85) were females, representing the gender's population in RMP, which is primarily dominated by males. Furthermore, more than half (51.2%) of the respondents were aged between 30 and 39 years old. Majority of the respondents were married (81.1%). The majority of the respondents possessed an SPM level, representing 58.4% of the sample. This is in line with the respondent's rank, with the majority being rank-and-file police officers (83.6%), followed by senior police officers (16.4%). In addition, most of the respondents (64.2%) reported their monthly income between RM3,001 and RM7,000, followed by monthly income less than RM3,000.00 (33.4%).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis is used to ensure the validity and reliability of each variable in this study before relational testing using a structural model is performed (Junusi et al., 2023). Average variance extract (AVE) and construct reliability (CR) are used to check the convergent validity of constructs. The measurement scale has convergent validity if the factor loading item is greater than or equal to 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019), the AVE is greater than 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), and the CR is greater than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2019). Table 4 summarizes the validity and reliability of the constructions. The AVE value for all the constructs, except for self-control and EM, is above 0.50, and CR is above 0.7, showing convergent validity. The AVE values for

self-control and EM are 0.472 and 0.451, respectively, which is less than 0.5 (Fornell and Lacker, 1981). However, Fornell and Lacker (1981) (cited in Huang et al., 2013) argued that the AVE value of 0.4 is acceptable due to the condition that if the AVE value is less than 0.5, but construct reliability is higher than 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is acceptable. Thus, convergent validity is achieved for self-control and EM constructs. This means that all items are valid. The CR value for all constructs ranges from 0.799 to 0.918, which is greater than 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019), which means that all constructs are reliable.

In addition to that, based on Table 4, the instrument utilized in this study satisfies the criteria for discriminant validity as the squared correlation coefficients (off-diagonal) of the two constructs are lower than the value of the AVE of the two constructs (on the diagonal) (Byrne, 2016). Since there are no problems with multicollinearity within the study's constructs, these results hence validate that all research variables have met discriminant validity.

Table 4 Construct reliability (CR), average variance extracted (on the diagonal) and squared correlation coefficients (on the off-diagonal) for study instruments

Constructs	CR	SC	IN	OJ	OP	SL	FP	LS	ST	EM
Self-control (SC)	.877	**.472**								
Integrity (IN)	.896	.301	**.633**							
Org. Justice (OJ)	.876	.128	.118	**.589**						
Org. Politics (OP)	.910	.059	.014	.141	**.671**					
Salary (SL)	.912	.119	.066	.144	.073	**.721**				
Financial Pressure (FP)	.917	.097	.083	.152	.154	.155	**.613**			
Lifestyle (LS)	.818	.102	.094	.038	.018	.008	.016	**.610**		
Stress (ST)	.918	.171	.110	.147	.068	.126	.124	.033	**.738**	
Employee Misconduct (EM)	.799	.235	.173	.241	.139	.243	.429	.040	.228	**.451**

Note: Diagonals (in bold) represent the average variance extracted (AVE), while the Off-diagonals entries represent the square correlations (r^2) value.

Furthermore, the fit indices of the measurement model need to meet the minimum requirement of past studies. Table 5 shows that the measurement model has achieved the suggested level and is thus deemed fit for structural analysis.

Table 5 Fit indices of the measurement model

Category of GOF	Fit Indices	Level of Acceptance	Authors	Results	Indication
Absolute Fit	RMSEA	< .08	Hair et al. (2019)	.029	
Incremental Fit	TLI	> .90	Hair et al. (2019)	.967	
	CFI	> .90	Hair et al. (2019)	.969	Good fit
	NFI	> .90	Hair et al. (2019)	.896	
Parsimony Fit	$\chi 2/df$	< 5.0	Bentler (1990)	1.367	

Structural Equation Model

The next step of the analysis is the structural model developed based on the previous section's measurement model. Based on Figure 2, this study's structural model shows the statistical fit of the model with the data. The SEM results show goodness of fit in the data ($\chi 2/df$ = 1.361, RMSEA = 0.029, TLI = 0.967 and CFI = 0.970).
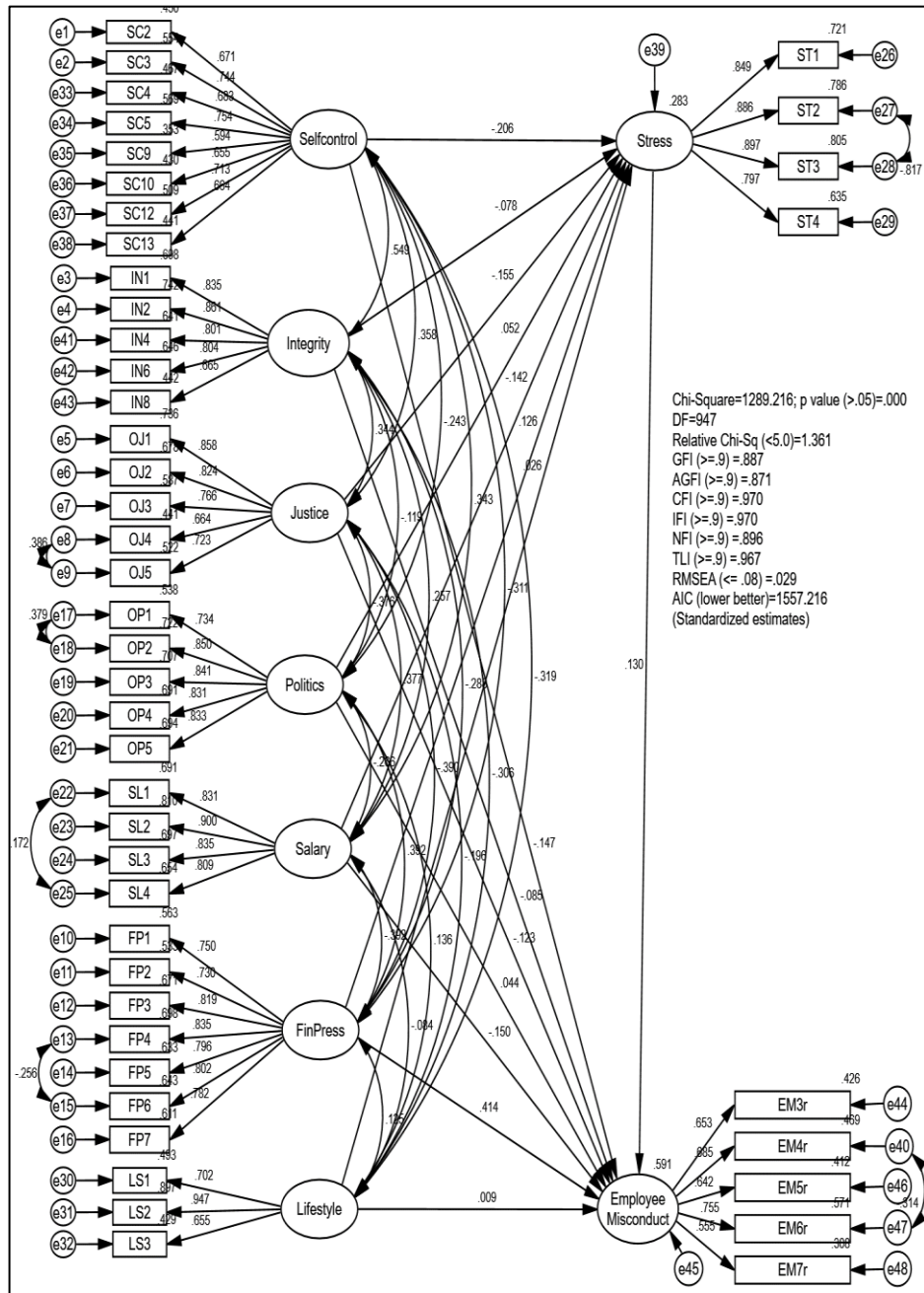
Figure 2 Structural Model

Hypothesis Testing Results: Direct Relationship

Table 6 showed that self-control ($\beta = -0.147$, $p<0.05$), organizational justice ($\beta = -0.123$, $p<0.05$), salary ($\beta = -0.150$, $p<0.01$), and financial pressure ($\beta = 0.414$, $p<0.01$) have a significant relationship on EM. In addition, this study also found that stress was significant and positively related to EM ($\beta = 0.113$, $p<0.01$). This finding can be interpreted as increasing the level of stress that will increase in EM. The five independent variables (self-control, organizational justice, salary, financial pressure, and stress) accounted for 59% of the variance in EM. Therefore, hypotheses H1a, H1c, H1e, H1f and H3 were supported in this study.

Table 7 showed that self-control ($\beta = -0.206$, $p<0.01$), organizational justice ($\beta = -0.155$, $p<0.01$), salary ($\beta = -0.142$, $p<0.01$), and financial pressure ($\beta = 0.126$, $p<0.05$) have significant relationship on stress. The four independent variables (self-control, organizational justice, salary and financial pressure) account for 28% of the variance in stress. Therefore, hypotheses H2a, H2c, H2e and H2f were supported in this study.

Table 6 Effects of Antecedents on Employee Misconduct

Path			Estimate of regression coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)	Beta (β)	Critical Ratio (CR)	Significance value (P-value)	Findings
EM	<--	SC	-.121	.047	-.147	-2.566	.010	H1a: Supported
EM	<--	IN	-.060	.038	-.085	-1.597	.110	H1b: Rejected
EM	<--	OJ	-.082	.034	-.123	-2.371	.018	H1c: Supported
EM	<--	OP	.026	.028	.044	0.933	.351	H1d: Rejected
EM	<--	SL	-.087	.028	-.150	-3.062	.002	H1e: Supported
EM	<--	FP	.272	.038	.414	7.224	.000	H1f: Supported
EM	<--	LS	.006	.028	.009	.206	.837	H1g: Rejected
EM	<--	ST	.088	.032	.130	2.768	.006	H3: Supported

Note: R = .532, R^2 = .283

Table 7 Effects of Antecedents on Stress

Path			Estimate of regression coefficient (B)	Standard Error (SE)	Beta (β)	Critical Ratio (CR)	Significance value (P-value)	Findings
ST	<--	SC	-.251	.075	-.206	-3.336	.000	H2a: Supported
ST	<--	IN	-.083	.061	-.078	-1.351	.177	H2b: Rejected
ST	<--	OJ	-.153	.055	-.155	-2.772	.006	H2c: Supported
ST	<--	OP	.045	.045	.052	1.007	.314	H2d: Rejected
ST	<--	SL	-.122	.045	-.142	-2.714	.007	H2e: Supported
ST	<--	FP	.123	.052	.126	2.351	.019	H2f: Supported
ST	<--	LS	.025	.046	.026	0.544	.586	H2g: Rejected

Note: R = .769, R^2 = .591

Hypothesis testing Results: Mediation Effect

In order to obtain valid results to test the mediating effect, the independent variables must have a significant direct effect on the dependent variables (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Awang, 2015). Samah (2016) suggested that the bootstrapping method be used to confirm the mediation outcome. From the bootstrapping method, the maximum likelihood estimation can determine the p values of the paths' estimation with a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval and a bootstrapping sample size of 5000. This study explores the effects of mediation based on the three decision criteria proposed by Hair et al. (2019) (Samah, 2016). Table 8 represents the direct, full mediation and standardized indirect effects (SIE) for the mediating effect of stress on the relationship between each independent variable on EM. The results show that the SIE of self-control, organizational justice, salary and financial pressure on EM were found to be significant at the 0.05 level (p = 0.012; p = 0.014; p = 0.020; and p = 0.029, respectively). However, the SIE of integrity, organizational politics, and lifestyle were found to be not significant (p-value > 0.05), and there is no mediation effect. Additionally, this study indicates that stress plays a partial mediator role between self-control and EM, between organizational justice and EM, between salary and EM, and between financial pressure and EM because the p-value for the full mediation model was significant at the 0.05 level (p = 0.010; p = 0.018; p = 0.002; and p = 0.000 respectively). Thus, the results support Hypotheses H4a, H4c, H4e and H4f.

Table 8 Bootstrap Results of Mediation Effect of Stress

Model/ Hypothesized Paths	Beta	p	95% CI Bootstrap BC		K²	Findings
			LB	UB		
Self-control → EM						Partial Mediation
Direct Model	-.174	.003				
Full Mediation Model	-.147	.010			0.028	
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)	-.027	.012	-.066	-.006		
Integrity → EM						No Mediation
Direct Model	-.094	.079				
Full Mediation Model	-.085	.110			0.011	
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)	-.010	.095	-.035	.002		
Organizational Justice → EM						Partial Mediation
Direct Model	-.143	.006				
Full Mediation Model	-.123	.018			0.021	
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)	-.020	.014	-.051	-.003		
Organizational Politics → EM						No Mediation
Direct Model	.050	.291				
Full Mediation Model	.044	.351			0.007	
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)	.007	.220	-.005	.028		
Salary → EM						Partial Mediation
Direct Model	-.168	.000				
Full Mediation Model	-.150	.002			0.020	
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)	-.019	.020	-.047	-.003		
Financial Pressure → EM						Partial Mediation
Direct Model	.430	.000				
Full Mediation Model	.414	.000			0.021	
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)	.016	.029	.002	.045		
Lifestyle → EM						No Mediation
Direct Model	.013	.771				
Full Mediation Model	.009	.837			0.004	
Standardized Indirect Effect (SIE)	.003	.536	-.011	.025		

Note: Legend: LB = Lower Bound; UB = Upper Bound; CI = Confidence Interval; BC = Bias Corrected; p = p-value; K² = Kappa squared.

DISCUSSIONS

The analysis shows four important findings that answer the research objectives. The first objective is to examine the relationship between antecedents (self-control, integrity, organizational justice, organizational politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle) and EM. Four significant factors were identified as being associated with EM: self-control, organizational justice, salary, and financial pressure. Self-control and EM have a significant and negative relationship, consistent with previous studies (Donner et al., 2016; Donner and Jennings, 2014; Donner et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021). This supports the general theory of crime (GTC) postulation that employees with low self-control are more likely to commit workplace misconduct and crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). This means that law enforcement officers with higher levels of self-control are less likely to engage in EM. Furthermore, organizational justice and EM have a significant and negative relationship, consistent with previous studies (Hashish, 2020; Fridell et al., 2021; Reynolds and Helfers, 2019; Wolfe and Piquero, 2011). This is consistent with social exchange theory (SET), which suggests that employees tend to reciprocate destructive behavior when their perceptions of justice in the organization are low. Law enforcement officers with higher perceptions of organizational justice led to lower levels of EM. In addition, Salary has a negative and significant relationship with EM, consistent with previous studies (Lawal et al., 2019; Moorthy et al., 2015; Socheat, 2015). In a similar vein, financial pressure is significantly and positively related to EM, consistent with earlier studies (Bonsu et al., 2018; Nawawi et al., 2018; Said et al., 2018a). This finding is consistent with the fraud triangle theory (FTT), which proposes three factors that influence employees' fraud: perceived pressure, perceived opportunity, and perceived rationalization (Cressey, 1950; Said et al., 2018a). In conclusion, law enforcement officers with higher salaries and lower financial pressures are associated with lower levels of EM.

The second objective is to examine the relationship between antecedents such as self-control, integrity, organizational justice, organizational politics, salary, financial pressure, and lifestyle on stress in law enforcement officers. Four factors were identified as significant with stress: self-control, organizational justice, salary, and financial pressure. Self-control is found to have a significant and negative relationship with stress, consistent with the results of previous studies (Baldwin et al., 2018; Boals et al., 2011; Nielsen et al.,

2020). A study by Nielsen et al. (2020) has shown that officers with higher self-control report lower levels of stress and burnout because they are better able to manage challenging situations and emotions effectively. This means that higher levels of self-control among law enforcement officers may help them cope better with job stressors such as critical incidents, administrative pressures, and public scrutiny. In addition, organizational justice has a negative and significant relationship with stress, consistent with the results of previous studies (Colquitt et al., 2013; Elechi et al., 2020; Lambert et al., 2019; May et al., 2020; Singh and Basu, 2022). A study by Singh and Basu (2022) among police officers in Indian states' police forces showed a negative correlation between organizational justice and occupational stress. This means that officers perceive fairness (fairness of outcomes, procedures and interpersonal treatment) in the workplace, leading to lower job stress and increased satisfaction. Furthermore, salary has a negative and significant relationship with stress, while financial pressure is significant and positively correlated with stress, consistent with earlier studies (e.g., Danish et al., 2015; Frank et al., 2017; Sivarajah et al., 2014; Violanti, 2014). Research by Frank et al. (2017) has shown that financial stressors, including inadequate pay or financial instability, are significant predictors of job stress among police officers. These financial pressures can intensify mental strain and reduce job satisfaction, which contributes to overall job stress. Additionally, research by Rajeswari and Chalam (2018) supports the link between financial challenges and elevated stress, noting that low wages and financial insecurity can contribute to burnout and job dissatisfaction within law enforcement roles. The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory suggests that stress occurs when individuals perceive a threat to their resources, including financial resources. Adequate compensation may reduce financial worries and stress related to economic security, while perceived inequalities or inadequate pay may contribute to stress. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of addressing antecedents and promoting a healthy work-life balance for law enforcement officers.

The third objective is to investigate the link between stress and EM in law enforcement officers. It found that high stress is linked to higher incidents of misconduct, suggesting that officers with higher stress levels may engage in behaviors that violate ethical standards or organizational rules. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Adekanmbi and Ukpere, 2019; Bashir et al., 2019; Bishopp et al., 2020; Bishopp et al., 2016; Nasurdin et al., 2014). This aligns with the General Strain Theory (GST), which suggests that individuals with high stress or strain may resort to deviant behavior as a coping mechanism to alleviate discomfort or achieve blocked goals (Agnew, 1992; Wu and Makin, 2021). In law enforcement, job stressors like high workload, critical incidents, shift work, and public scrutiny can create strain, potentially leading to misconduct.

The fourth objective is to examine the mediating effect of stress on the relationship between antecedents and EM. The results show that stress partially mediates the relationship between self-control, organizational justice, salary, and financial pressure with EM. Self-control has a direct effect on EM via stress, consistent with past studies (Agnew, 1992; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). This means that law enforcement officers with higher levels of self-control are less likely to engage in EM. High-stress levels can undermine an officer's ability to maintain self-control, leading to higher misconduct rates. This finding supports the GST, which suggests that stressors in an individual's environment can lead to negative emotions, which may result in misconduct as a coping mechanism (Agnew, 1992). Organizational justice also has a direct effect on EM, partially mediated by stress, consistent with past studies (Nasurdin et al., 2014). Higher perceptions of organizational justice lead to lower levels of EM, and officers who perceive injustice may experience higher stress levels, which can contribute to misconduct. This finding aligns with Transactional Stress Theory, which suggests that stress resulting from perceived unfair treatment can lead to negative behavioral outcomes (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Furthermore, salary and financial pressure factors have a direct effect on EM, with stress playing a partial mediating role, consistent with past studies (Thoits, 1995; Bakker and Demerouti, 2016). According to the Job Demands-Resources Model, low salary and financial strain can deplete resources, increasing stress and misconduct (Bakker and Demerouti, 2016). Therefore, financial pressures and lower salaries can contribute to stress among officers, potentially increasing the likelihood of misconduct as a response to financial strain.

Theoretical Implications

In addition to supporting the hypotheses, the study findings indicate additional theoretical implications. First, this study contributes to the understanding of EM in Malaysian enforcement agencies by integrating individual, organizational, and socio-economic factors and stress in a single study. Previous studies have investigated these factors separately (Donner et al., 2016; Nasurdin et al., 2014; Moorthy et al., 2015; Said et al., 2018a), but this study combines them in one comprehensive framework. Stress exacerbates the impact of self-control, organizational justice, salary, and financial pressure on misconduct behaviors. Second, the study also elucidates the role of stress as a mediator in the relationship between antecedents and employee misconduct, enriching general strain theory (GST) (Agnew, 1992) by providing empirical evidence from the Royal Malaysian Police, a stressful job (Bishopp et al., 2020; Omar et al., 2020; Wu, 2018). GST suggests strains increase the likelihood of negative emotions like anger and frustration, which can lead to criminal behavior if individuals do not have appropriate coping mechanisms. Finally, the study was conducted in Malaysia, a country known for its strong collectivism, and the hypotheses were supported, showing that these relationships hold even in a highly collectivist, high-power distance society like Malaysia (Hofstede, 1983). This research contributes to the understanding of employee misconduct behaviors and their impact on the workplace.

Practical Implications

Misconduct by employees negatively impacts an organization's productivity, financial, physical, and psychological. Corporate leaders must understand the causes of misconduct and develop preventive strategies. This study reveals that stress exacerbates the effects of organizational justice, self-control, salary, and financial pressure on employees. The research suggests that stress can be a mediator in the relationship between antecedents and misconduct, suggesting targeted interventions for stress management within the RMP. The insights can inform policy formulation, focusing on stressors and promoting employee well-being. The Royal Malaysia Police Anti-Corruption Plan (PAPDRM) 2020–2024 and Royal Malaysia Police Strategic Plan (PSPDRM) 2021–2025 should be reformulated, focusing on factors contributing to misconduct. The RMP Human Resource Department should review the police salary scheme and allowances to ensure they are in line with the increasing cost of living. The last government review of the salary scheme for police and civil servants was in 2013, quite a long time ago (Malay Mail, 2023). Organizations can use the findings to tailor training programs and leadership development initiatives to equip managers and supervisors with skills to identify and mitigate workplace stressors. Effective leadership practices can foster a supportive environment conducive to employee resilience and performance (Javed et al., 2019; Ly, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2015).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study on employee misconduct behavior in the Royal Malaysian Police has several limitations. Firstly, the non-self-report measures used may introduce bias, as supervisors may not always provide accurate information about their employees' work behaviors. Secondly, the data collected from enforcement officers may limit the generalizability of findings to other organizations due to different working cultures, conditions, manpower, and responsibilities. Future research should consider data from the Immigration Department of Malaysia and the Road Transport Department to generalize the findings further. Lastly, the quantitative study method may limit the comprehensive findings. Future studies should incorporate qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups to provide deeper insights into the subjective experiences of stress and misconduct within the Royal Malaysian Police. Addressing these limitations and exploring avenues for further research can advance knowledge in organizational behavior and contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions for addressing misconduct in diverse organizational contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the empirical findings of this study, it can be concluded that self-control, organizational justice, salary and financial pressure are predictors of employee misconduct among police officers. Self-control, organizational justice, salary and financial pressure also bring job stress among police officers, and

this job stress further triggers police misconduct. In summary, by addressing the stressors identified in this study and focusing on improving organizational justice, compensation, and leadership practices, police departments can significantly reduce employee misconduct. These findings provide a solid foundation for police top management to develop comprehensive strategies not only to enhance officer well-being but also to improve the overall effectiveness of law enforcement agencies.

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