Article

Exploring employee's perception of line manager's leadership style and its impact on employee retention: A qualitative investigation

Syed Monirul Hossain¹, Syed Arslan Haider²,*, Shehnaz Tehseen¹, Martin Kocourek³, Kavitha Sathasivam¹, Fakhra Yasmin³, Farkad Mahli⁴

¹ Department of Management, Sunway Business School, Sunway University, Bandar Sunway 47500, Malaysia

² Department of Management Sciences, Capital University of Science and Technology, Islamabad 44000, Pakistan

³ Department of Informatics and Quantitative Methods, Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Kralove, 500 03 Hradec Králové, Czech Republic

⁴ Department of Management, UnikL Business School, UniKL University, Kuala Lumpur 54000, Malaysia

* Corresponding author: Syed Arslan Haider, haidershah24@gmail.com

Abstract: This study investigates non-academic employees' perceptions of their line managers' leadership styles at a private university in Malaysia and how these perceptions influence their intention to remain employed. Employing a qualitative approach and the path-goal theory as a theoretical framework, data were collected through purposive sampling from 10 non-academic employees and analyzed thematically using NVivo 12 software. The findings reveal that a supportive and participative leadership style fosters an informal leadership dynamic between line managers and subordinates. Informal leadership behaviors encompass affective qualities and effective communication that enable the development of close relationships outside the workplace, facilitating increased employee engagement and motivation levels. Consequently, this approach notably improves employee retention. This study offers a comprehensive understanding of informal leadership styles contributing to enhanced human resource management at the private university while providing an inclusive perspective on employees' perceptions and their intention to remain employed. Finally, we propose a model of employees' perception of leadership styles as the main driver that better serves their intention to stay in organizations.

Keywords: leadership; employee retention; path-goal theory; supportive leadership; participative leadership; informal leadership

1. Introduction

Leadership is defined as the capability to inspire, influence, and motivate individuals or groups to enable them to achieve desired outcomes or common goals (Rana et al., 2019). Leadership can exert a substantial influence on employee engagement. When employees are highly engaged, they tend to exhibit greater enthusiasm and involvement in contributing to the company's success (Ismail et al., 2021). Crucially, leadership can have a profound effect on the success or failure of an organization (Alatawi, 2017). A leader must possess the capability to recognize strategies and activities that enable employees to reach their full potential and motivate them to achieve organizational goals (Rana et al., 2019). Despite numerous studies conducted on leadership styles and employee retention across various industries, there is a paucity of research in the education sector. Furthermore, existing studies have been limited to positivist perspectives, with few exploring employee views or perceptions of their line manager's leadership style (Popli and

Rizvi, 2015; Shukla et al., 2023). High turnover rates in organizations are costly, underscoring the need for effective human resource planning (Kaliannan et al., 2023). Implementing these strategies can assist organizations in managing their talent, leading to increased employee retention and higher organizational performance (Kaliannan et al., 2023). This is because an employee's level of job satisfaction is influenced by Human resource management (HRM) practices, which, in turn, can impact their intention to remain with or leave the organization (Bibi, et al., 2018). Employees with high job satisfaction are more committed to their work, resulting in lower turnover and higher retention rates (Dodanwala et al., 2023). Previous research indicates that employee turnover is a global issue faced by organizations, adversely impacting overall business performance (Covella et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2023; Saleh et al., 2023). It is imperative for line managers to recognize that their informal leadership styles can influence the organizational climate, as well as employee performance and satisfaction. In today's dynamic and intensely competitive business environment, it is incumbent upon organizations to recognize the paramount importance of leadership development initiatives as a vital means of preserving a competitive advantage. (Hoang et al., 2023). The inclusion of non-academic staff in this research study is justified by several factors. Firstly, it allows for a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the institution, as non-academic staff play crucial roles in supporting academic endeavors and shaping the organizational culture. Secondly, their perspectives can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of support services and administrative processes, which indirectly impact academic outcomes. Thirdly, their representation promotes diversity and inclusivity, acknowledging the contributions of various stakeholders within the institution. Fourthly, by involving non-academic staff, the study can capture a more nuanced understanding of the organizational climate and interpersonal dynamics, which influence productivity and overall institutional success. While the crucial role of leadership has been extensively emphasized across myriad sectors and substantially documented in the extant literature, the phenomenon of informal leadership within the context of higher education institutions, particularly among non-academic personnel, has garnered scant attention from scholars investigating leadership dynamics. Despite the widespread recognition of leadership's significance, inquiries into the manifestation and impact of emergent, informal leadership practices among administrative and support staff in academic environments remain largely overlooked and underexplored within the leadership scholarship. Given this, the study aims to address the following research questions:

1) What are employees' perceptions of their line manager's leadership style?
2) How do these perceived leadership styles and behaviours influence their intention to stay with the organization?

2. Literature review

2.1. Path-goal theory

The path-goal theory elucidates how leaders motivate and remove obstacles for followers to achieve designated goals (Northouse, 2019). Furthermore, this theory emphasizes the relationship between the leader and the followers and the selection of

different types of leadership styles to complement or supplement missing elements in the work setting. The foundation of this theory is derived from the expectancy theory, which posits that an individual's behavior is believed to lead to a certain outcome (Achua and Lussier, 2015). A study by Al-Sada et al. (2017) states that leadership is a process that occurs between the leader and the follower, and the relationship between them affects each other in achieving shared goals. This theory is practical and suitable for line managers as they lead and help their employees achieve their goals (Liu et al., 2023). As line managers provide sufficient support to their employees, it motivates the employees to perform better. The versatility of path-goal theory leadership styles enhances employee job satisfaction, resulting in a higher retention rate (Raziq et al., 2018). Additionally, good leaders develop comprehensive strategies and systems that support and reward their subordinates, thus minimizing turnover intentions (Dixon and Hart, 2010).

2.2. Leadership approaches

The path-goal theory delineates four primary leadership styles or approaches: directive leadership, supportive leadership, participative leadership, and achievement-oriented leadership (Northouse, 2019). Leaders who embrace a directive leadership style provide clear instructions for work schedules and task delegation to subordinates (Li et al, 2018). For instance, the leader ensures the team comprehends that they are in full control of work matters, and employees are responsible for complying with procedures and meeting the leader's expectations. This leadership style can aid in establishing routine processes and cognitive structure, but it may instill fear in subordinates, affecting job quality and the ability to achieve organizational goals (Rana et al., 2019). Supportive leadership manifests when a leader demonstrates consideration toward employees, attending to their well-being and personal needs (Ma et al., 2020). This approach encourages employees to be transparent and open, especially in resolving difficult situations (Elsaied, 2019). An atmosphere that enhances trust, teamwork, respect, and emotional support is often cultivated when this leadership style is adopted, leading to decreased employee stress levels.

Participative leadership allows employees to partake in the decision-making process of an organization (Mwaisaka et al., 2019). Permitting employees to express their views in decision-making serves as a form of intrinsic motivation, enriching the employee's experience in the workplace (Boxall et al., 2015). Participative leadership enables employees to take charge of their job assignments, motivating them to provide creative ideas and solutions (AlMazrouei, 2022). Previous studies highlight that this leadership style encourages employee motivation and satisfaction (Abdullah et al., 2023; Hoang et al., 2023), enhancing trust between the leader and members. However, this leadership style may lead to increased stress and psychological burden for employees who engage extensively in providing opinions and suggestions in the decision-making process (Li et al., 2018).

The achievement-oriented leadership style inspires followers to highly perform in challenging tasks (Northouse, 2019). An achievement-oriented leader ensures employees are constantly motivated and committed to their work. In the process of

achieving challenging goals, leaders expect continuous improvement from employees (Mwaisaka et al., 2019). However, in addition to leadership styles, the path-goal theory also emphasizes the importance of considering follower characteristics and task characteristics when determining suitable leadership styles for employees (Northouse, 2019). Leaders need to understand the perception and personality of employees before adopting a specific leadership style. For example, achievement-oriented leadership is more suitable for an employee who has high confidence in their ability to complete challenging tasks (Salhieh et al., 2023). Regarding task characteristics, particularly when the task or job given is ambiguous, a directive leadership style is more appropriate in this situation (Pizzolitto et al., 2023). This allows leaders to enforce clear rules and requirements for employees.

2.3. Retention

In this era of globalization, employers must strive to attract and retain talented employees to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Rodríguez-Sánchez et al., 2020). Employees are the main asset of every organization, but the labor cost for recruiting and training these skilled employees can be substantial (Aminuddin, 2018). It is noteworthy that the cost for an organization to replace an employee who leaves is between one to two times that employee's position's annual salary (Brown and Stewart, 2020). Besides leading to organizational expenditure, it also decreases productivity and customer satisfaction. Previous empirical studies show that employee turnover is negatively related to organizational performance (Jiang et al., 2023; Kyndt et al., 2009). Therefore, employee retention is a continuous human resource strategy designed by the organization to keep and engage valuable employees once hired (Chou and Johennesse, 2017).

2.4. Informal leadership, leadership styles and retention

Informal leadership can be understood as a social phenomenon that transcends the formal boundaries of authority and power (Atkinson et al, 2023). It is a manifestation of the complex interplay between individual attributes, group dynamics, and situational factors (Badura et al., 2022). Informal leaders often possess certain personal qualities, such as charisma, expertise, communication skills, and the ability to inspire and motivate others, which allow them to exert influence and gain voluntary followership from their colleagues or team members (Vo et al., 2024).

A study on supportive leadership and employee voice behavior in three Egyptian companies highlighted that supportive leadership significantly affects employee voice behavior (Elsaied, 2019). The research noted that when employees face dissatisfaction in the workplace, they are very likely to either leave or stay and voice their dissatisfaction (George and Zhou, 2001; Lee and Varon, 2020). Supportive leaders motivate employees to voice their concerns. Furthermore, communication is key when dealing with employee dissatisfaction (Elsetouhi et al., 2023). Leaders need to listen and manage subordinate expectations in the face of dissatisfaction (Liyanagamage et al., 2023). Supportive leaders are found to trust, respect, cooperate with, and emotionally support their employees, especially during

difficult situations. As a result, employees feel respected and supported, increasing organizational commitment and encouraging them to stay willingly (Silva et al., 2023). Additionally, Newman et al. (2016) conducted a study on the relationship between participative leadership and job performance in an internship setting in China, reporting a significant relationship between leadership style and job performance despite the short-term nature of internships. Engaging and consulting subordinates in the decision-making process develops trust between the leader and their followers (Newman et al., 2016). Moreover, considering employee opinions and ideas increases motivation and leads to higher job performance (Xu et al., 2023). Motivated employees aspire to stay longer in the organization (Bilderback and Miller, 2023).

Similarly, research conducted by Chan (2019) in the retail sector of Hong Kong demonstrates that participative leadership significantly influences employee job satisfaction and work engagement. The findings suggest that participative leadership empowers employees to assume responsibility for their work tasks, resulting in heightened job engagement. Prior studies have indicated that employees exhibit higher levels of motivation and enthusiasm when they find enjoyment in their workplace (Abdelmotaleb, 2023; Al Halbusi et al., 2023). As employees become more engaged in their roles and experience job satisfaction, it contributes to the retention of skilled and valuable personnel (Kossyva et al., 2023).

On the other hand, research conducted by Rana et al. (2019) in trading firms in Kenya revealed an adverse relationship between directive leadership style and employee performance. Conversely, the achievement-oriented leadership style showed a significant positive association with employee performance. The study's findings suggested that leaders who establish rigid processes, protocols, and regulations negatively impact employee trust, resulting in decreased overall performance (Rana et al., 2019). Leaders who exhibit an achievement-oriented leadership style can inspire employees to reach goals set by the leaders and reward them for accomplishing assigned tasks (Rana et al., 2019), thereby boosting job satisfaction and employee performance. Consequently, employees feel valued and are less likely to consider leaving the organization (Rana et al., 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach

The present study employed a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative approaches are conducive to comprehending and analyzing behavioral patterns exhibited by individuals or groups (Mohajan, 2018). Aligned with the interpretivist tradition, researchers attempt to elucidate how participants ascribe meaning to their lived experiences through interactions with their environment, thereby constructing knowledge (Lapan et al., 2012). Consequently, this inquiry adopted an interpretive paradigm and phenomenological lens to explore employees' perceptions regarding their line managers' informal leadership styles and how these perceptions influence their intentions to retain organizational members.

Given the nature of the research design and objectives, this study employed a purposive sampling strategy to augment depth of understanding. Purposive sampling

facilitates the selection of respondents capable of providing pertinent and insightful information (Campbell et al., 2020). Boddy (2016) suggests that a range of 15–30 interviews is appropriate for case study research. Accordingly, 15 junior-level executives from various departments of a private Malaysian university were purposively selected as participants. To preserve anonymity and confidentiality, participants were assigned labels from P1 to P15. Although the sample size was relatively small, interviews continued until data saturation was achieved. In this instance, data saturation occurred at Participant P9, where no novel insights emerged. We have conducted interviews up 15 participants to ensure data validity and reliability as secondary source data were non-existent in the archive.

3.2. Case and participants

In employing a theoretical sampling approach (Foley et al., 2021), we selected an educational institution in Malaysia characterized by active involvement in education and academic innovation. The institution offers a diverse range of degree and postgraduate programs to students globally. Our choice was guided by the aim to explore the relationship between informal leadership and academic innovation within the context of a competitive and globally oriented educational market. This institution, operating within colleges, universities, and international schools, has strategically positioned itself through partnerships and ventures into new market segments. Despite these efforts, the institution faces challenges in retaining its academic and administrative staff, prompting a closer examination of employee retention concerns, particularly in the face of declining retention rates.

3.3. Data collection and data analysis

The data collection process spanned from December 2021 to February 2022. Upon receiving approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee, participants were given consent forms to assure data confidentiality and anonymity in all respects. After that, they were contacted via email, and interviews were subsequently conducted through virtual platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The interviews lasted approximately 25 to 35 min on average. A semi-structured interview format was employed, allowing for follow-up probes and requests for additional information. This approach facilitated an open sharing of participants' ideas and experiences, aligning with the recommendations of Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Notably, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, participants expressed a preference for online interviews over in-person meetings, citing safety and comfort concerns. The interviews explored research questions through inquiries such as "Could you describe your line manager's informal leadership style"? and "How did your line manager's informal leadership style affect your intention to stay in this organization"? With the participants' consent, the interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Once all the interviews had been conducted and the data had been transcribed, the information was divided into different themes through a coding process, which was then analyzed and interpreted (Weston et al., 2001). Specifically, NVivo software was used to analyze the data thematically. The data analysis process employed an inductive approach to coding,

allowing themes and patterns to organically emerge from the raw data (Naeem et al., 2023). Initially, open coding was conducted, wherein the interview transcripts were thoroughly examined line-by-line to identify and label relevant concepts and phenomena (Sallay et al., 2024). This open coding phase yielded a substantial number of preliminary codes grounded in the participants' verbatim accounts (Lynch et al., 2024). Subsequently, the study engaged in axial coding, wherein the initial codes were systematically compared, consolidated, and organized into higher-order, overarching categories (Ishfaq et al., 2024). These categories represented the central phenomena under investigation, as well as their causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Throughout the coding process, we adhered to the orthographic conventions outlined by Saldaña (2021). Specifically, in NVivo codes (verbatim words or phrases from participants) were denoted using double quotation marks, while descriptive codes (researchers' summarizations) were presented in italicized lowercase letters (Saldaña, 2013). Simultaneously, we maintained an audit trail, documenting analytical memos, code definitions, and the rationale for coding decisions to enhance confirmability and trustworthiness. The coding process culminated in selective coding, wherein the core categories were integrated and refined, resulting in the identification of the central, overarching theme that captured the essence of the participants' experiences and perceptions. Subsequently, from the initial coding, the labeling and categorizing of different themes were completed thematically (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The findings were then interpreted and contextualized within the extant literature and theoretical framework.

4. Findings

4.1. Perception of employees on their line managers

The study's results indicate that an overwhelming majority of participants, 93%, concurred that an informal leadership approach exerted a substantial influence on their inclination to remain within the organization. Conversely, a mere 7% of participants perceived no bearing of informal leadership style on their intent to continue their association with the organization. Intriguingly, however, informal leadership style appeared to impact their proclivity to depart from the organization, as evidenced by the data presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Perception about line manager's informal leadership style on intention to stay in the organization.

Yes/No	Total Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Yes	14	93
No	1	7

The participants conveyed their perspectives regarding the informal leadership style of their direct supervisors, as illustrated in **Table 2**. An analysis of the data suggests that 80% of participants held a favorable view of their line manager's leadership approach, while the remaining 20% possessed a negative perception,

potentially stemming from unsatisfactory experiences. Notably, a significant portion of the participants disclosed having highly supportive leaders who fostered employee autonomy in decision-making processes. Consequently, this empowering leadership approach engendered a sense of encouragement and motivation among the employees. Evidence for this drawn from the responses of participants:

> *"He is a very supportive leader where he constantly gives us positive reinforcement in terms of his words. When he speaks, it's always very encouraging."* (P13)

> *"He always gets input from me and my team, before he makes decisions. He is very cooperative and he has full trust in us."* (P5)

However, 30% of the participants had a negative perception of their line manager leadership style which has also led to the resignation of one of the former employees. This was expressed by one of the participants as:

> *"I would describe my line manager as someone who lacks faith in his employees and he likes to micromanage. Basically, the line manager's leadership style discouraged me and also reduced my motivation and commitment to the company."* (P7)

Table 2. Perceived leadership style.

Yes/No	Total Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Positive	12	80
Negative	3	20

4.2. Theme 1: Affective qualities

One of the salient themes that emerged from the study pertains to affective qualities. One of the significant leadership characteristics that affect employee intention to stay is affective qualities that are shown in the line manager's leadership. Affective qualities that derive from leadership can be defined as the capability of an element of incident that can cause changes in one's affect emotion, mood, and feelings (Li and Zhang, 2005). Affective qualities that emerged from the study were empathy, empowering, trusting, and respecting subordinates. Apart from that, leaders that can help boost subordinate's self-esteem and confidence will also help in developing higher job satisfaction and employee engagement. This will then improve the overall organization's performance in the long run. This was agreed by one of the participants as:

> *"He actually trusts us that we can do our job because we sort of highly skilled and experienced employees who can actually perform… I can say that it's the inclusiveness of supportive leadership that actually helped the employee to grow not only just to perform."* (P6)

4.2.1. Treat with dignity and respect

It is important for employees to be treated fairly with dignity and respect as it will help enhance employee's well-being. Consequently, this encourages better performance and job engagement which helps to increase employee retention in the long run. Furthermore, participants admitted that when the line manager places trust in their subordinates, this leads them to feel more confident in the workplace.

Subsequently, having trust and transparency with the line manager leads to better motivation.

"*In any situation, our managers will stand by our sides, whether it's wrong or right. Line managers will work together to find solutions when we are facing problems. I'm leading my own team as well as another two teams from other countries. So, they allow me to make any decision and they respect it. They really trust me and let me to decide on matters regarding the team. But of course, if I have any issue or any questions, they are there to help me as well.*" (P8)

However, specifically one of the participants admitted that the line manager is lack of truth and dishonesty which led to her intention to leave the organization.

"*I'm dealing with someone that is not honest which is my line manager. The managers misuse the company's money. When I got to know about it, I confronted him. However, he denied it. Moreover, he is related to the owner of the company. I hate dishonest people so I went and informed the owner of the company about the manager's malpractice. The manager got fired. After the incident, I left the company.*" (P8)

4.2.2. Boost self-esteem and confidence

It is also important for leaders to help boost employees' self-esteem and confidence as it enhances employee's job satisfaction and leads to higher job participation and commitment (Theresia et al., 2018). Participants shared their perception of how the leader's confidence affects their self-esteem as well as their own confidence. In fact, the participants admitted that they are not afraid to make any mistakes as they know their line managers there will be someone to back them up. Participants express their views as:

"*My line manager is very strong and confident. Therefore, as a staff, we are also confident to share our problems that related to work. So, she will give the solution on the spot, and she will advise you. We also work very confidently because we know if something goes wrong at least my manager will back me up.*" (P12)

"*Trust from line manager is very important because it helps you build your self-confidence as an employee. If your boss doesn't trust you, then you will feel insecure. You will have this insecurity in yourself.*" (P10)

4.2.3. Develop approachable and empathetic behavior

Leaders who are very supportive are commonly known as approachable people and generally have more empathy towards their employees. In fact, they often think from the employee's perspective and understand the issues that the employees face especially in the workplace. Therefore, when the subordinates trust the leaders, they tend to be more open to sharing and approach their leaders to seek advice or opinions. This was expressed by participants as:

Even though he's the line manager, where he has a lot more responsibilities than us, yet is always there to understand what we are going through especially when we struggle or face challenges in terms of student numbers. He understands our situation and gives us the solutions, brainstorming new ideas with us to come up with better strategies so that we can achieve our target,

understand our target market, understand where lead sources are coming from, and better understand how we can hit the numbers more strategically." (P15)

"*Before he responds to the customer complaints, or before he decides on anything, he always gets input from us first. He will call us or he will text us or he will email us about the overall situation to get input from all of us. So, I feel really supportive because he always consulted and listened to us first rather than blaming us. He understands our situation.*" (P14)

4.3. Theme 2: Effective communication

The findings highlighted that 70% of the participants revealed that they had experienced effective communication with their line manager even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most importantly, participants described that strong communication is always present even though the employees engaged in 'work from home' mode. This was expressed by one of the participants as:

"*Communication was definitely there as my line manager is very responsive. For example, he always answers our calls whenever we need him. He is always there to speak to us whenever there are issues that pop up in our work. So, yes, there is strong communication, even though we were working from home.*" (P3)

Analysis of the study showed there were two sub-themes derived to support effective communication. There were appreciative listeners and multi-level communication.

4.3.1. Good listener and sharing of ideas

More than half participants agreed about how their line manager is a good listener to their opinions and ideas. In fact, the managers also provide feedback, solutions and ideas when employees face issues in the workplace. Furthermore, the statement above shows that line managers who listen and provide feedback to subordinates help them to grow as individuals and also build and groom them into future leaders One of the participants articulated her views as:

"*I managed to get a supportive leader. So, I feel like I grew as a person. I grew myself a lot because the line manager appreciates your idea. They support your idea. although sometimes your idea is not accepted, but they listen and hear you. Because as a person, you need to have self-confidence at work. If you can't voice out and don't have a voice at your workplace how you are going to lead in the future? Yeah, that is how I see how important is the supportive manager.*" (P11)

"*When customers complain, it's up to probably at the director level or even at the CEO level. Then it comes down back to us itself and our managers will let us know the problem. Then we will work actually to come up with a solution. For example, we will work together on how to answer the parents' or students' issues in order to minimize the damage.*" (P08)

4.3.2. Multi-level communication

Employees who receive support and feedback from the organization understand better the duty or task given and bringing themselves more deeply into their role performances as they feel obliged to repay the organization. Even though 70% of them agreed there is good communication flow from their line managers, if this does

not take place, it will have a negative impact on employee engagement level. In fact, 30% of participants shared their experiences that there was lack of communication between the line managers and the employees and due to this they feel demotivated and isolated. One of the participants also explained that she was assigned a task by the line manager but there was no communication or clear instruction given, due to that the participant was forced to seek help from another line manager which in turn affected her emotionally. One of the participants expressed the view:

> *"My manager left for a long break and left behind some tasks that I've never done before. I feel my manager at that point in time, was not that helpful. In fact, he pushes me to look to other managers for help. Honestly speaking, at that point in time, I was quite irritated because I needed to seek others' assistance, rather than my own manager who was supposed to assist me. That kind of hurts that it led me to a point where I really don't know how to complete that task. So, hurts me badly, not just the motivation par but it affected my respect towards him as a manager."* (P07)

4.4. Theme 3: Informal leadership

An in-depth analysis further discovered that some employees also experience informal leadership with their line managers. Supportive and participative leadership significantly develop informal leadership among leaders and subordinates. The statements below indicate that employees can have an informal relationship outside of the workplace with their line managers whereby the relationship goes beyond just a subordinate and employee relationship. At the same time, they can share about their personal life or non-work-related matters openly and they trust that their line manager will be there to support them.

> *"So, they're not just friends outside of work, but they can also be mentors like giving you advice on what you should do but it doesn't even have to be work or career-related. For example, my line manager guides or supports me in other things outside of work as well."* (P1)

> *"My line manager is very supportive. As his subordinate, I don't mind sharing things with him as he is very open to opinions and criticism. Our communication is very strong. We talk about many things, even issues, even conflicts that we have about each other."* (P15)

5. Discussion

Research findings underscore the significant impact of informal leadership styles on employees' intention to remain within an organization. Leadership approaches also hold the potential to facilitate employee motivation, commitment, and satisfaction (Jones and Smith, 2020). When employees experience motivation, they are more inclined to extend their tenure with the organization and exhibit enhanced performance. To address the research question, the path-goal theory (House, 1971) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how leadership styles influence employee motivation and satisfaction, ultimately affecting their intention to stay. A process model (**Figure 1**) is employed to elucidate employees' perceptions of leadership styles and the subsequent impact on their intention to

remain with the organization. **Figure 1** specifically delineates the emerging themes and findings that influence turnover intention: (i) informal leadership; (ii) affective qualities; and (iii) effective communication. Supportive and participative leadership nurture informal relationships, wherein employees can trust and rely on their leaders both within and beyond the workplace, fostering an informal and close bond between leaders and subordinates.
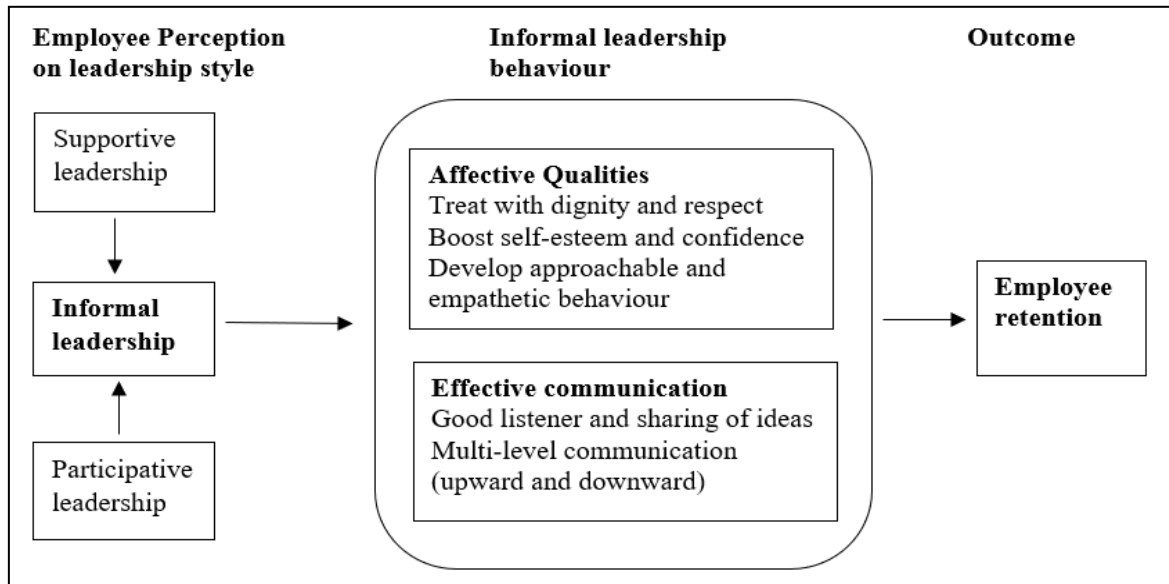

Figure 1. Employee's perception of informal leadership style and how it affects their intention to stay in the organization.

A salient contribution of this study lies in its revelation that employees who trust their line managers cultivate an informal leadership environment conducive to sharing personal matters beyond the professional realm. Indeed, these employees actively seek advice from their line managers on non-work-related matters. The current study underscores the pivotal role of informal leadership, wherein line managers forge close bonds with their subordinates extending beyond the workplace, in engaging and motivating employees. This finding resonates with previous research by Calderwood et al. (2021), which demonstrated that informal leadership fosters a favourable environment and positive outcomes in terms of employee engagement, motivation, and commitment. The path-goal theory (House, 1971) provides a theoretical lens to understand how supportive and participative leadership styles influence employee motivation and satisfaction. All participants expressed the perception that a line manager who exhibits a supportive demeanour and encourages employee participation engenders a sense of reliance on the leader, irrespective of the situation, prompting employees to be more open and honest. The study's findings indicated that leaders possessing affective qualities, such as trust, in encouraging and empowering employees to make decisions, indeed impact their motivation to remain with the organization. This corroborates Chan's (2019) work, which demonstrated that participative leadership enhances employee motivation, and crucially, trust emerges as a critical factor in retaining employees (Idell et al., 2021). Paramount to the discussion is the necessity for leaders to establish trust and empower

subordinates to work independently, thereby facilitating their growth and career development. When subordinates feel trusted in the decision-making process, their confidence, motivation, and job engagement are augmented (Al Otaibi et al., 2023). The path-goal theory (House, 1971) posits that effective leadership entails providing support and guidance to subordinates, removing obstacles to goal attainment, and clarifying expectations, which collectively enhance employee motivation and satisfaction. Communication emerges as a vital element in comprehending employee wants and needs, as well as providing input, which is a crucial factor affecting retention within an organization (Sun et al., 2023). The study's results indicated that line managers consistently maintained positive communication even during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. However, some employees acknowledged experiencing communication breakdowns with their line managers at certain junctures, negatively impacting them and leading to frustration and demotivation. A supportive leader plays an indispensable role in facilitating employees' ability to voice their dissatisfaction, as the leader should listen empathetically and demonstrate understanding of employees' sentiments (Elsaied, 2019). By doing so, employees feel cared for, respected, and appreciated, positively affecting their motivation and engagement levels. The study's outcome underscored the importance of communication between leaders and subordinates, which encompasses sharing information with the immediate line manager about their feelings and suggestions for how line managers could positively contribute to their career growth (Tian et al., 2020). Moreover, the results align coherently with previous research, demonstrating that effective multi-level communication establishes a transparent, trusting, and credible relationship with employees, leading to increased job loyalty and engagement, thereby enhancing employee retention (Irawati et al., 2021).

This paper contributes significantly to leadership literature in several ways. First, it demonstrates that informal leadership is shaped by supportive and participative behaviors, influencing affective qualities such as treating others with dignity and respect, enhancing self-esteem and confidence, and fostering approachable and empathetic behavior. Moreover, informal leadership plays a direct role in promoting effective communication by being a good listener, encouraging the sharing of ideas, and facilitating multilevel communication through both upward and downward channels. Importantly, the various mechanisms associated with informal leadership behavior have a substantial impact on employee retention within the organization. Second, it emphasizes the important role of supportive and participative behaviors in shaping informal leadership processes, demonstrating their profound impact on employee retention. This highlights the significance of individual managers employing these mechanisms to persuade employees to remain, contingent on designing sustainable career paths. Third, the paper elucidates how the effective utilization of affective qualities and communication channels by managers directly enhances employee retention. Lastly, it underscores the challenges posed by informal leadership when managers fail to deliver essential affective qualities and effective communication, potentially leading to a significant decline in employee retention rates and adverse effects on organizations.

6. Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to understand employees' perceptions of their line managers' leadership styles and how these styles impact their intention to stay at a Malaysian private university. Specifically, this study employed the path-goal theory, which emphasizes a top-down leader-subordinate relationship. The results demonstrated that the supportive and participative leadership styles have fostered an informal leadership atmosphere, leading to improved employee retention. This convergence of informal leadership provides new insights into the theory. Participants in the context of the Malaysian private university recognized that different leadership styles do indeed affect their intention to remain within the organization, aligning with the path-goal theory's assertion that leadership styles significantly and positively influence employee retention. The findings of this research indicate a positive correlation between supportive and participative leadership and employee retention, offering a better understanding of leadership styles that can assist Malaysian private universities in more effectively managing their human resources and providing an inclusive perspective on informal leadership.

The implications of this study hold significant importance, especially for businesses and managers. The study aids private institutions in comprehending alternative strategies to retain their staff. For instance, HR departments should provide more training to meet the leadership competency needs of line managers, enhancing their ability to lead their teams more effectively. Moreover, it's crucial for management to recognize that there's no 'one-size-fits-all' leadership style, and every leader should identify the style that best suits different individuals. For managers, implementing the most suitable leadership style is essential to engage and retain their subordinates, thereby bringing out the best in each employee. Line managers in this field can also leverage the results of this research, understanding that supportive and participative leadership contributes to forming an informal leadership structure that aids employee retention.

However, this study does have some limitations. The primary limitation is the relatively small sample size, which may not fully represent the entire population of the selected private university. Nonetheless, all interviews were conducted until the saturation point, and no new emerging themes were identified. Importantly, qualitative studies do not aim for generalizability but rather focus on providing a rich understanding of the research area. Future research could consider a broader geographical scope by examining leadership styles experienced by employees in other private universities and how these styles affect retention rates in the organization. Additionally, besides leadership styles, other factors that facilitate employee retention need to be considered by future researchers.

Despite these limitations, the results of this qualitative phenomenological study have allowed participants to express their perceptions, feelings, and real-life experiences regarding how their line managers' leadership styles influence their intention to stay. It is suggested that more research is needed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between different leadership styles and employee engagement and retention. Future researchers may also explore

employees' relationships with peers and identify other factors impacting employee turnover intentions. Organizations should invest in developing leaders with the right competencies and characteristics. Moreover, the demographics of the interviewees who participated in this study could be further expanded. Future research may include top management employees and academics, as the current research only obtained data from junior executive and middle management positions. Furthermore, to obtain a large dataset, future research could consider adopting a mixed-methods approach, which includes both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. With this approach, researchers can collect life experiences from participants while also exploring the correlation between variables using numerical data and statistical evaluation (Batt and Kahn, 2021).

7. Limitations and future research

While this research is theoretically grounded, a key limitation lies in its exclusive focus on a single organization. Consequently, it is crucial to exercise caution in generalizing the findings and consider them exploratory. Despite offering preliminary insights into the intricate dynamics of informal leadership within individual departments—particularly its link to supportive and participative leadership—and their impact on employee retention through affective qualities and effective communication, the findings should be viewed with circumspection. Subsequent research involving diverse contexts and organizations would enhance the robustness of the proposed framework.

Our emphasis on informal leadership implies a noteworthy contribution to the academic innovation domain. However, the coexistence and influence of leadership styles such as transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, Machiavellian, and servant leadership should not be overlooked. Participants from the educational institution under scrutiny indicated a clear reliance on interpersonal values and leadership self-efficacy for fostering academic innovation. A compelling avenue for future research lies in delving into the distinct roles of each leadership category in academic innovation and investigating potential interaction effects among them.

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