



Workplace Stressors' Impact on Employee Performance in SMEs with Moderating Role of Social Support: A Conceptual Review

Leny Cahyati Ahmad Suryanto¹

Teh Raihana Nazirah Roslan²

Norazah Mohd Suki³

^{1,2,3} *Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kampus Kuala Lumpur 41-3, Jalan Raja Muda Abdul Aziz, 50300, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.*

(✉ Corresponding Author)

Abstract

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) are central to Malaysia's economy, yet many struggle to sustain employee performance under persistent workplace stress. In SMEs, limited resources and informal structures often intensify pressure, making four stressors salient: role ambiguity, role conflict, excessive workload, and job insecurity. This study presents a concept-centric conceptual review of how these stressors influence employee performance in Malaysian SMEs and identifies social support as a key moderating condition. Drawing on the Job Demands-Resources model, the Demand-Control-Support tradition, Stress and Coping theory, Conservation of Resources theory, and Social Exchange Theory, the review integrates fragmented insights into a coherent Malaysia-focused framework. Constructs are anchored to established measures to ensure definitional precision and enable rigorous operationalization in future empirical work. This study argues that these stressors deplete cognitive and emotional resources, thereby undermining task performance, reducing contextual contributions, and constraining adaptive performance in dynamic SME environments. In contrast, well-matched social support from supervisors, coworkers, and the organization can buffer these negative effects by replenishing resources, strengthening coping capacity, and reinforcing reciprocal commitment. This study advances explicit moderation pathways and testable propositions for empirical validation, while translating the framework into practical priorities for SME leaders. Recommendations emphasize clarifying expectations, reducing incompatible demands, calibrating workload to capacity, communicating transparently about employment conditions, and institutionalizing credible support routines. By linking dominant SME stressors to multidimensional performance through resource-based mechanisms and support contingencies, this review offers a focused roadmap for future research and for strengthening performance in Malaysian SMEs.

Keywords: Employee performance, Job demands-resources Model, Small and medium-sized enterprises, Social support, Workplace stressors.

1. Introduction

Workplace stress is widely recognised as a negative psychological state that arises when perceived job demands exceed an individual's ability to cope, with cognitive and emotional consequences for health and behaviour (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Globally, poor mental health is estimated to cost about USD 1 trillion in lost productivity each year, underscoring the organisational relevance of stress management (World Health Organization, 2024). In Malaysia, recent surveys suggest elevated burnout and emotional strain among employees, driven by long hours, demanding performance targets, and work-life imbalance, with younger cohorts reporting particularly high symptoms (Employment Hero, 2024; Institute for Public Health, 2024). These patterns indicate that workplace stress is no longer a private matter but a systemic organisational issue with economic implications. The challenge is amplified in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

SMEs account for about 97 percent of Malaysian firms and a large share of employment and value added, yet they typically operate with lean structures, tight resources, and informal people systems (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023). Such features create fertile conditions for core stressors that impede day-to-day functioning. Four stressors are salient in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and form the independent variables in this review, namely role ambiguity when expectations and responsibilities are unclear, role conflict when competing demands are imposed, workload when time pressure and task volume exceed capacity, and job insecurity when continuity of employment feels uncertain. These stressors are routinely associated with lower employee performance, the central dependent variable in this paper, through reduced concentration, motivation, and goal attainment (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Dousin et al., 2019; Susanto et al., 2022).

Evidence from Malaysian settings also points to contextual triggers such as ergonomic constraints, limited headcount, and ad hoc communication that intensify these stressors and erode work quality (Hizam et al., 2024). A

long tradition in organisational research explains why stressors undermine performance. The Demand Control Support perspective argues that high demands, low control, and weak social resources elevate strain and impair functioning (Johnson & Hall, 1988; Karasek, 1979). The Job Demands Resources (JD-R) view generalises this logic by framing stressors as demands that consume energy, while resources enable motivation and recovery (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Stress and Coping theory emphasises appraisal and coping efficacy when people face threat or overload, whereas Conservation of Resources theory highlights loss spirals once valued resources are depleted (Hobfoll, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Taken together, these lenses explain consistent empirical findings that excessive workload, unclear roles, and insecurity predict emotional exhaustion and diminished performance.

Social support is frequently proposed as a remedy. Support from supervisors, coworkers, and the organisation can provide emotional comfort, instrumental help, and information that changes appraisal and restores resources. Classic work identifies a buffering function of support under high demands (Cohen & Wills, 1985). More recent studies, however, suggest the support-strain performance linkage is not uniform. The type of support, the source, the timing, and the reciprocity of exchange appear to shape whether support truly buffers strain or, in some cases, becomes ineffective or even counterproductive (Putra et al., 2023). Social Exchange Theory clarifies why perceptions of fairness and mutuality matter. Employees invest effort when they believe the organisation and supervisors value them and will reciprocate, while perceived one-way support or empty signals weaken the motivational pathway that should convert support into better performance (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976).

Despite growing evidence, three gaps remain pronounced in the Malaysian SME context. First, prior reviews often examine stress or performance broadly but do not synthesise how the four core stressors of role ambiguity, role conflict, workload, and job insecurity jointly connect to multidimensional employee performance outcomes in SMEs, where multitasking and resource scarcity are the norm. Second, theoretical explanations are fragmented across JD-R, Demand Control Support, Stress and Coping, Conservation of Resources, and Social Exchange perspectives, with limited integration tailored to SME realities such as informal structures, thin managerial layers, and uneven digitalisation (Dousin et al., 2019; Khaw & Chelliah, 2024). Third, findings on the moderating role of social support are mixed, and little work specifies the support configurations that are most effective for SMEs in Malaysia, including how supervisor, coworker, and organisational support differentially buffer specific stressors or how reciprocity norms condition these effects. This conceptual review addresses these gaps by developing a context-specific, theory-driven framework for Malaysian SMEs. The focus is explicitly on role ambiguity, role conflict, workload, and job insecurity as the key demands that threaten employee performance, and position social support as a cross-cutting moderator that can alter both strain processes and motivational mechanisms. By crosswalking JD-R, Demand Control Support, Stress and Coping, Conservation of Resources, and Social Exchange Theory, this study clarifies how support operates as both a resource that buffers demands and a social exchange signal that strengthens commitment and discretionary effort. The review distils practical levers for SME leaders, such as clarifying roles and priorities, calibrating workload, communicating employment realities transparently, and cultivating credible supervisor, coworker, and organisational support that is responsive and reciprocal.

Building on the above foundations, this study pursues three objectives: (i) to synthesise evidence on how role ambiguity, role conflict, workload, and job insecurity relate to employee performance in Malaysian SMEs; (ii) to integrate five perspectives namely the Job Demands and Resources model, the Demand, Control and Support model, Stress and Coping theory, Conservation of Resources theory, and Social Exchange theory to explain the mechanisms that connect demands to performance; and (iii) to advance a context-specific conceptual framework that specifies social support as a moderator and sets out testable propositions for subsequent empirical study. The contributions are threefold. First, the review consolidates the four independent variables, a dependent variable, and a moderating variable into a single, coherent account consistent with the revised proposal model. Second, it situates these theories within the operating realities of Malaysian SMEs, thereby addressing a context that remains under-examined. Third, it translates the framework into practical guidance for owners and managers on when, where, and how to deploy social support to safeguard performance under pressure.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Foundations

Work stress is best understood as a transactional process in which individuals continuously evaluate what is being asked of them and what they have available to meet those demands. Through primary appraisal, a situation is judged as threatening, challenging, or benign; through secondary appraisal, people assess the resources and coping options at hand. The same workload or role demand can therefore produce very different outcomes across employees and across days, depending on perceived resources and coping efficacy. Coping responses then follow problem-focused efforts to change the situation or emotion-focused efforts to manage strain, and these choices shape subsequent behaviour and performance at work by conserving or depleting energy and attention (Ismail and Qi, 2025; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model formalises this logic by distinguishing between demands that consume energy and resources that enable motivation and recovery. In the present review, workload, role ambiguity, and role conflict are core demands: they tax attentional control, disrupt goal pursuit, and accelerate fatigue. Social support is positioned as a pivotal resource because it can restore energy, improve clarity, and sustain motivation when demands are high. Put differently, demands propel a health-impairment path to exhaustion and performance loss, whereas resources propel a motivational path to engagement and performance; which path dominates in SMEs depends on the balance between these forces (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti & Bakker, 2023).

The Demand–Control–Support (DCS) tradition adds precision by showing that the combination of high demands, low decision latitude, and weak social support is particularly harmful. Decision latitude discretion over how and when to execute tasks lets employees re-sequence work, choose methods, and solve problems locally; social support from leaders and colleagues provides guidance, backup, and encouragement. When either latitude or support is lacking, time pressure and unclear expectations more readily convert into strain, errors, and slowed

execution. When both are present, the same nominal demand can be metabolised with less cost to performance (Johnson & Hall, 1988; Karasek, 1979).

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory explains the momentum behind these processes. People strive to obtain, protect, and build valued resources (time, energy, skills, relationships). Resource loss is more potent than equivalent gain, and losses can trigger loss spirals as depleted employees become less able to invest in effective coping. Social support matters here because it adds or safeguards resources clarity that prevents rework, tangible help that buys time, or reassurance that stabilises effort thereby interrupting loss spirals and enabling recovery (Hobfoll, 1989).

Because workplaces are social systems, the Social Exchange lens clarifies when support translates into effort. Support is not merely instrumental; it is a relational signal. When help is timely, fair, and genuine, employees infer that the organisation and its agents value them, thereby strengthening their obligation to reciprocate with persistence, cooperation, and discretionary effort. Conversely, one-sided or perfunctory support weakens reciprocity expectations and blunts the motivational channel even if the nominal quantity of "support" appears adequate (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976).

Taken together, these perspectives yield a coherent, mechanism-rich account for SMEs. The transactional view details appraisal and coping; JD-R classifies the focal constructs and predicts dual pathways; DCS isolates the protective roles of latitude and support under pressure; COR captures dynamics of loss and recovery; and Social Exchange specifies the relational conditions under which support becomes performance-relevant. This integration implies that the same stressor can have different performance consequences depending on (a) how it is appraised, (b) the level of resources available (especially support), (c) the discretion employees have to adjust their work, (d) whether resources are being lost or replenished over time, and (e) whether support is perceived as reciprocal and fair (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Blau, 1964; Demerouti & Bakker, 2023; Emerson, 1976; Hobfoll, 1989; Ismail & Qi, 2025; Johnson & Hall, 1988; Karasek, 1979; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The aforesaid mechanisms are salient in Malaysian SMEs, where formal structures are lean, coordination is informal, and employees commonly carry multiple roles within small teams. In such contexts, ambiguity and conflict emerge easily, workloads accumulate, and the availability of structured HR support is limited, making everyday supervisory and collegial behaviour the *de facto* resource system. The framework, therefore, anticipates greater variability in outcomes across units, depending on how leaders and teams create clarity, grant latitude, and provide credible, reciprocal support within these constraints (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023; Dousin et al., 2019).

2.2. Employee Performance in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Employee performance refers to behaviours that advance organizational goals through task accomplishment and discretionary effort that support colleagues and customers (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Williams & Anderson, 1991). Previous scholars commonly distinguish between task, contextual, adaptive, and innovative performance to capture the full breadth of contributions (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Williams & Anderson, 1991). In SMEs, individuals often wear multiple hats, making these non-task facets salient for day-to-day effectiveness (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Dousin et al., 2019; Williams & Anderson, 1991).

Valid assessment is critical because single employees can disproportionately influence outcomes in small teams (Dousin et al., 2019). Measurement typically relies on multi-item scales covering task quality, efficiency, adherence to procedures, problem solving, service behaviour, and collaborative contribution (Koopmans et al., 2014). To reduce single-source bias and capture both internal effort and observable results, assessments combine self-reports with supervisor ratings (Dousin et al., 2019; Koopmans et al., 2014). A multidimensional approach prevents underestimating contextual, adaptive, and innovative contributions alongside core task delivery (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Koopmans et al., 2014; Williams & Anderson, 1991).

Malaysian and regional evidence shows that performance deteriorates as workplace stressors accumulate (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2022). These effects are pronounced in lean SME teams where one person frequently manages several functions (Dousin et al., 2019). In practice, this manifests as slower cycle times, more rework, and inconsistent service quality as attention and energy are diverted to coping with overload or unclear roles (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2022). Accordingly, protecting performance requires simultaneous management of demand levels and resource availability in the work setting (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Susanto, Dousin et al., 2019; Haryono, & Purwanto, 2022).

2.3. Role Ambiguity and Employee Performance

Role ambiguity is the absence of clear information about responsibilities, performance standards, priorities, and decision authority, which disrupts goal setting, reduces confidence, and slows execution because employees are unsure what to do, how to do it, and how their work will be evaluated (June & Mahmood, 2011; Mega et al., 2025). In Malaysian workplaces, particularly smaller firms with fluid job descriptions and informal procedures, ambiguity is common because staff must cover multiple duties across functions, heightening uncertainty during daily operations (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Dousin et al., 2019). Under these conditions, employees often defer decisions, seek repeated approvals, or duplicate effort to avoid mistakes, which wastes time and increases routine errors that erode work quality (Dousin et al., 2019; June & Mahmood, 2011). Ambiguity fragments attention and undermines task persistence, leading to rework, missed handoffs, and slower throughput, collectively weakening output in lean teams (Abdirahman et al., 2020; June & Mahmood, 2011). As ambiguity accumulates, organizations observe declines in task quality, timeliness, and service consistency because energy is diverted from execution to sensemaking and risk avoidance (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2022).

Findings across sectors show that the strength of these effects varies with job design, support structures, and autonomy, with role ambiguity emerging as a salient stressor in high-pressure corporate settings but sometimes weaker where other role stressors dominate (Hassan et al., 2019; Majid et al., 2023). Contextual lenses further indicate that structural and institutional features can either amplify or mitigate ambiguity, from funding and policy environments that create systemic uncertainty to internal HR practices and employee involvement that clarify expectations and bolster commitment (Johar et al., 2023; Sarabdeen et al., 2025). Leadership and climate conditions

also shape appraisal and coping, with toxic leadership and low support intensifying the ambiguity-strain pathway, while supportive environments can dampen downstream risks such as hostile climate or turnover intentions (Blomberg et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Silva & Rodrigues, 2024).

Taken together, the aforementioned mechanisms are salient in Malaysian SMEs where multitasking and informal coordination amplify the performance costs of unclear roles, supporting a direct negative association between role ambiguity and employee performance (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Dousin et al., 2019; June & Mahmood, 2011; Susanto et al., 2022).

Proposition H1a: Role ambiguity is negatively associated with employee performance in Malaysian SMEs.

2.4. Role Conflict and Employee Performance

Role conflict arises when employees face incompatible expectations from different senders or at different times, or when required behaviours clash with personal values; these incompatibilities force trade-offs that drain attention and elevate strain during work tasks (Achour et al., 2024; Mega et al., 2025). In Malaysian small firms, staff commonly juggle customer service, administration, and sales within the same shift, inviting competing deadlines and instructions that degrade decision quality and slow routine work, especially where coordination is informal (Dousin et al., 2019; New Straits Times, 2024). Across sectors, role conflict is consistently associated with lower satisfaction and weaker performance indicators, such as accuracy and timeliness, suggesting an adverse effect in Malaysian SMEs, where boundary-spanning roles are common (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2022). Mechanistically, employees respond to conflicting cues by delaying decisions, seeking repeated approvals, and duplicating effort to avoid errors, which diverts energy from execution, increases rework, and depresses output in lean teams (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Dousin et al., 2019).

Past research found that role conflict reduced satisfaction and firm performance, while emotional intelligence buffered these effects, indicating both direct and indirect pathways to outcomes (Ibrahim et al., 2025). In Malaysian micro, small, and medium enterprises, a survey of 51 employees found that conflict management practices were linked to satisfaction and confirmed a negative association between conflict and morale, although the small sample and the omission of mediators limit explanatory depth (Maniendaran et al., 2025). Comparative work shows contextual variation: among Bangladeshi professionals, work-family role conflict lowered job and life satisfaction, highlighting cross-profession differences, whereas among Malaysian nurses, conflict increased stress that then reduced life satisfaction, with social support mitigating stress but not the conflict itself (Achour et al., 2024; Priyanka et al., 2024). Sector-specific studies echo these dynamics: digital entrepreneurs reported substantial performance loss under role conflict and stress, agricultural actors in low-income settings faced overlapping duties and weak coordination that lowered efficiency and called for structural supports, and hospitality workers showed conflict effects on performance through wellbeing, amplified by extraversion (Huo & Jiang, 2023; Ismail & Daud, 2021; Shahbandi, 2022). Taken together, the literature indicates a robust negative link between role conflict and performance in Malaysian SMEs, with magnitude conditioned by context, conflict management practices, and personal resources such as emotional intelligence and perceived support (Dousin et al., 2019; Ibrahim et al., 2025; Susanto et al., 2022).

Proposition H1b: Role conflict is negatively associated with employee performance in Malaysian SMEs.

2.5. Workload and Employee Performance

Workload is the amount and intensity of tasks within available time and energy, with quantitative overload reflecting too much work for the time available and qualitative overload reflecting work that exceeds available skills and resources, and both forms are linked to fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and lower work quality when they persist (Alias et al., 2019; Haider et al., 2017). In Malaysian SMEs, long working hours and frequent multitasking are common, especially where staffing is lean and deadlines are tight, and these conditions increase errors, reduce concentration, and predict lower accuracy, slower response times, and weaker service quality in daily operations (Business Today, 2024; Dousin et al., 2019). Although moderate challenge can sometimes energise effort, evidence from Malaysian small firms suggests workload pressures are typically chronic rather than episodic, making a negative association with employee performance the most plausible expectation (Abdirahman, et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2022).

Evidence across sectors reinforces this pattern. A systematic review of Malaysian SMEs identified workload as a recurring structural issue tied to role overload, including in family-owned firms (Bahsri et al., 2023). Among staff in a private university, high administrative and teaching demands within a trimester system were associated with lower job performance (Zamri et al., 2024). In hospitals, higher workload correlated with higher burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, indicating a strain pathway that can degrade performance (Koharuddin et al., 2021). For Malaysian white-collar workers, workload increased mental fatigue with partial mediation by achievement motivation, highlighting cognitive mechanisms that sap performance capacity (Ramasamy et al., 2023). A narrative synthesis across Malaysian sectors linked high workload to exhaustion, dissatisfaction, and turnover intentions, underscoring broad adverse outcomes even if causal precision is limited (Hasin et al., 2023). In Indonesian manufacturing, workload directly reduced performance and, indirectly, increased stress, fully mediating performance loss, illustrating a dual pathway consistent with resource depletion in physically demanding settings (Herdiana & Sary, 2023). Taken together, these findings converge on the expectation that sustained workload pressures depress employee performance in SMEs through fatigue, attentional narrowing, errors, and strain-related withdrawal from discretionary effort (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Business Today, 2024; Dousin et al., 2019; Susanto et al., 2022).

Proposition H1c: Workload is negatively associated with employee performance in Malaysian SMEs.

2.6. Job Insecurity and Employee Performance

Job insecurity is the perceived threat of job loss or the perceived loss of valued job features such as income. Job insecurity is the perceived threat of job loss or the loss of valued job features such as income, schedule, or career progression, and this threat undermines commitment and engagement while elevating anxiety that disrupts daily

performance routines (Alias et al., 2019; Hobfoll, 1989). In Malaysia, thin margins and market volatility make insecurity salient for many SMEs, and perceived limited prospects discourage investment in learning and reduce initiative and creativity that are central to service and customer satisfaction in small firms (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023; Malay Mail, 2024). Evidence from related Malaysian settings links insecurity with withdrawal behaviours, slower task completion, and reduced output quality, supporting a negative pathway from job insecurity to employee performance in SMEs (Abdirahman et al., 2020; Susanto et al., 2022).

Broader studies clarify sources and mechanisms. External shocks, such as nearby offshoring, increased job exits among vulnerable groups in SME manufacturing, highlighting structural spillovers that heighten insecurity (El-Sahli et al., 2022). Internal dynamics also matter, as insecurity predicted presenteeism more strongly than job demands or health in a Malaysian government-linked company, indicating emotional responses can override physical constraints in driving counterproductive attendance (Sharkawi et al., 2021). Among precarious Malaysian workers, insecurity impaired emotional stability, while perceived social support buffered its impact, consistent with the resource-protection model in relational contexts (Abdul Jalil et al., 2023). Within Malaysian SMEs, job security and wages were stronger deterrents of turnover than job satisfaction, underscoring the primacy of financial and structural stability for retention under uncertainty (Baharim et al., 2024). Technology change can amplify threat perceptions, as greater technology involvement in Malaysian shared services centres was associated with higher insecurity even as some employees framed automation as an upskilling opportunity, revealing heterogeneous appraisals (Yeoh, 2023). Cross-cultural evidence shows mainly indirect performance effects: insecurity increased burnout and work-family conflict, which then depressed performance, with organizational justice attenuating these strains, highlighting conditional pathways rather than uniform outcomes (De Angelis et al., 2021). Taken together, the literature indicates that job insecurity operates through motivational withdrawal, cognitive strain, and affective depletion, with effects shaped by structural exposure, workplace practices, and available social and justice cues (Abdirahman et al., 2020; De Angelis et al., 2021; Yeoh, 2023).

Proposition H_{1a}: Job insecurity is negatively associated with employee performance in Malaysian SMEs.

2.7. Social Support as a Moderating Resource

Social support comprises emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal assistance delivered by supervisors, colleagues, and the organization, each shaping appraisal and coping in distinct ways that matter for performance under demand (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). Mechanistically, emotional support reduces anxiety and restores energy, informational support clarifies expectations and improves problem solving, instrumental support redistributes tasks or provides tools that reduce strain, and appraisal support offers feedback that guides improvement; together these forms interrupt the translation of high demands into strain and performance loss (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Johnson & Hall, 1988). The effectiveness of support depends on its quality, timing, and reciprocity, with one-sided or poorly matched support failing to help or even increasing dependence, a realistic risk in resource-constrained SMEs where leaders often lack formal training in supportive behaviours (Putra et al., 2023; Khaw & Chelliah, 2024). In Malaysia, many small firms lack structured human resource programs, making daily supervisory and collegial behaviour the practical route for performance protection and support during busy periods or market disruptions (Kasim & Hashim, 2020; Dousin et al., 2019). Accordingly, support is expected to buffer the negative effects of core stressors when the form matches the deficit, for example, informational support for role ambiguity and instrumental support for workload in lean teams, consistent with resource buffering principles (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Johnson & Hall, 1988).

Broader SME evidence in Malaysia further clarifies configurations and boundary conditions. Limited and inward-looking co-ethnic networks constrained entrepreneurs' access to resources and markets, underscoring the need for bridging ties to expand support quality (Ruan et al., 2025). By contrast, bonding, bridging, and linking social capital each promoted ESG strategy adoption among Malaysian SMEs, indicating that multi-level ties can function as organizational support platforms (Ooi, 2024). Personal dispositions alone were insufficient to drive innovative intent, as openness to change outperformed self-enhancement, cautioning against overattributing effects to psychosocial factors absent concrete support (Yusof & Imm, 2020). During pandemic disruption, stronger support systems improved adaptation, mental health, and engagement, highlighting support's relevance to resilience in small firms even when measured via self-reports (Zakaria et al., 2023). Longitudinal evidence showed that support moderated stressors such as role ambiguity and emotional exhaustion, strengthening belonging and reducing anxiety over time in Malaysian small firms (Palil et al., 2023). At the structural level, institutional tools like the Simplified ESG Disclosure Guide and Responsible Investment Sukuk illustrate how policy infrastructure can operate as higher-order support for SMEs, though weak enforcement and limited stakeholder engagement reveal gaps between policy and practice (Iwani et al., 2024).

Proposition H_{2a}: Social support moderates the relationship between role ambiguity and employee performance such that the negative association is weaker at higher levels of social support in Malaysian SMEs.

Proposition H_{2b}: Social support moderates the relationship between role conflict and employee performance such that the negative association is weaker at higher levels of social support in Malaysian SMEs.

Proposition H_{2c}: Social support moderates the relationship between workload and employee performance such that the negative association is weaker at higher levels of social support in Malaysian SMEs.

Proposition H_{2d}: Social support moderates the relationship between job insecurity and employee performance such that the negative association is weaker at higher levels of social support in Malaysian SMEs.

Based on the above discussion, the conceptual framework of this study is illustrated in Figure 1. It encompasses

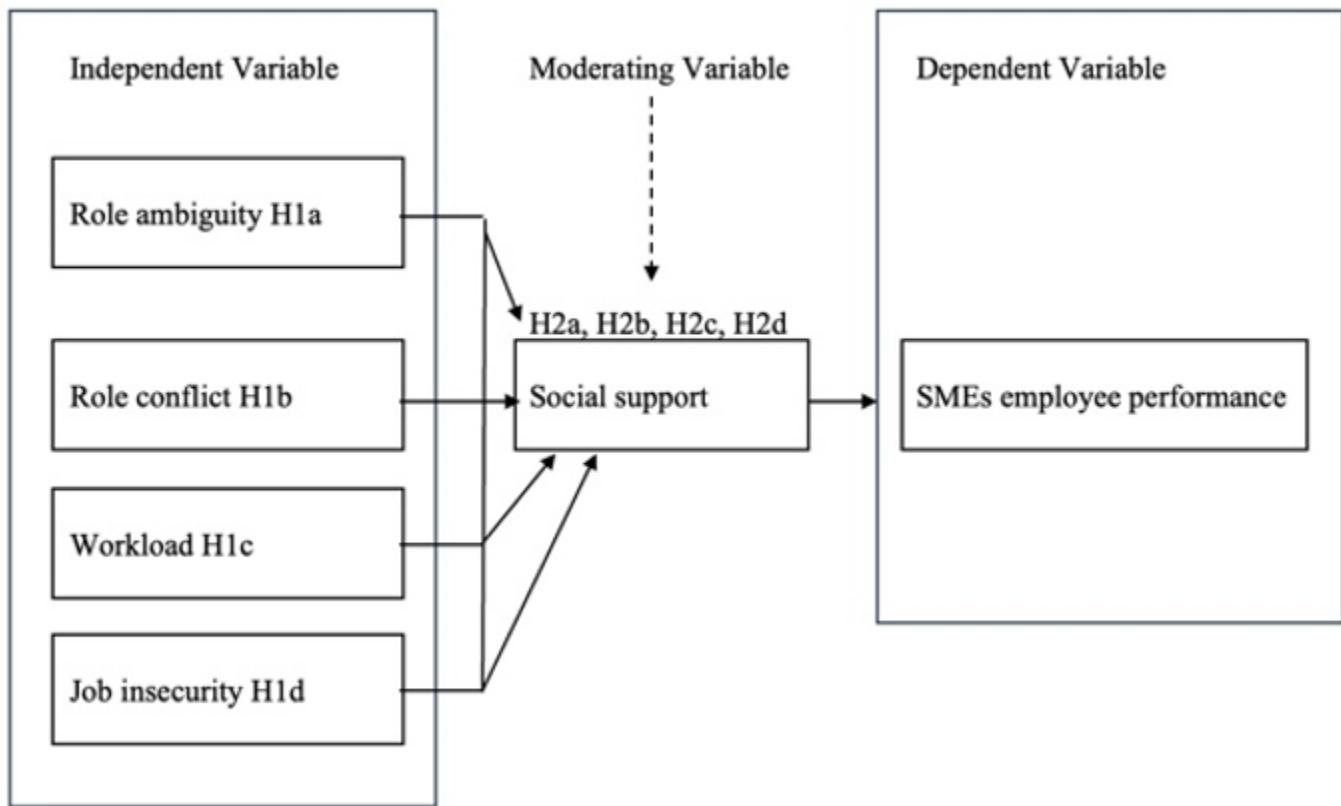


Figure 1.

Conceptual framework of workplace stressors and employee performance in Malaysian SMEs with the moderating role of social support.

3. Research and Methodology

3.1. Design and Scope

This paper adopts a theory-building conceptual review to explain how workplace stressors influence employee performance in Malaysian SMEs and how social support moderates these effects. The review is concept-centric and explanatory: it integrates mechanisms from the Job Demands–Resources model, the Demand–Control–Support tradition, Stress-and-Coping theory, and Social Exchange Theory to derive a context-sensitive framework and testable propositions for future empirical research (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Blau, 1964; Johnson & Hall, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Construct definitions are anchored to canonical measures to maintain clarity for later operationalisation, including role ambiguity and role conflict (Rizzo et al., 1970), workload (Van Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994), job insecurity (De Witte, 2005), social support (Zimet et al., 1988), and employee performance facets commonly used in organisational research (Tsui et al., 2013). The approach follows established guidance for integrative, theory-advancing reviews in management and applied psychology (MacInnis, 2011; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005).

3.2. Search, Screening, and Synthesis

A priori protocol defined the population of interest (employees in SMEs, with an emphasis on Malaysia), the focal constructs (role ambiguity, role conflict, workload, job insecurity, social support, and performance), eligible evidence (peer-reviewed empirical and conceptual articles and high-quality reviews), and the synthesis logic. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, supplemented by region-relevant portals to ensure adequate coverage of Malaysian SME work. Boolean strings combined construct and context terms and were iteratively refined through backward and forward citation tracking from seminal sources. Eligibility required clear construct definitions and an explicit link to employee performance or closely related outcomes; Malaysian SME studies were prioritised, while analytically transferable findings from comparable contexts were retained when they illuminated mechanisms. Titles and abstracts were screened before full-text review, and decisions were recorded in an audit trail. Extraction captured context, construct operationalisations, sources and types of support, effect directions, and boundary conditions. Synthesis proceeded concept-centrally by clustering evidence under each stressor and mapping it to support dimensions emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal, then aligning the emergent regularities with the four theoretical lenses to specify moderating pathways and proposition wording (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Tranfield et al., 2003).

To make the synthesis transparent and actionable, the extracted regularities were consolidated into a map that links theoretical insight to managerial implications and to priorities for empirical work in Malaysia. Table 3 organises these elements across the stressor–support–performance relationships by showing what the evidence suggests, what SME leaders can do, and what researchers should test next. This table concludes the synthesis step and provides a bridge to the research framework and propositions that follow.

To integrate the extracted findings into a structured agenda, this review synthesises insights across the stressor, support, and performance pathways. Table 1 presents a consolidated view by linking theoretical insights to practical implications for Malaysian SMEs and to research priorities. It shows not only how chronic stressors undermine performance and how support moderates these effects, but also how reciprocity, fairness, and SME specific contexts condition outcomes. This table concludes the methodology's synthesis stage and serves as a bridge to the research framework and propositions that follow.

Table 1. Synthesis, Implications, and Research Priorities.

Synthesis insight	Implication for Malaysian SMEs	Priority for future research
Chronic stressors reduce task, contextual, and adaptive performance through resource depletion (JD R, DCS, Coping).	Track these stressors routinely and treat them as performance critical risks, not only well being issues.	Test overall and domain-specific performance effects using validated multi-facet scales (Tsui, Lin, & Yu, 2013).
Social support is a moderating resource; effects are strongest when support is matched to the deficit.	Provide informational support for ambiguity, emotional support for conflict, instrumental support for overload, and credible assurance for insecurity.	Estimate interaction effects and possible curvilinearities in support-demand combinations (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti & Bakker, 2023).
Reciprocity and fairness shape whether support translates into sustained effort (SET, COR).	Build norms of mutual aid and transparent give and take to strengthen buffering and reduce iso strain.	Measure perceived reciprocity and test it as an enhancer of the support–performance pathway (Blau, 1964; Hobfoll, 1989).
SME context and culture condition mechanisms and feasible interventions.	Use low cost, supervisor led practices that fit lean structures and bilingual workforces.	Examine heterogeneity across micro, small, and medium firms and assess measurement invariance across Malay and English instruments.

Note: JD R = Job Demands and Resources; DCS = Demand Control Support; SET = Social Exchange Theory; COR = Conservation of Resources.

This synthesis highlights where managerial interventions can be most effective and where future research is most urgently required, thereby preparing the ground for the discussion that follows.

3.3. Trustworthiness, Transparency, and Limitations

Credibility was strengthened by anchoring constructs in canonical measures to avoid drift, keeping an audit trail of search strings and screening decisions, and examining rival explanations such as non-linear buffering and context contingencies typical of SMEs. As a synthesis of published scholarship, no human participants or organisational records were involved, and no ethics approval was required; sources are cited, and materials documenting the protocol are available upon request. The method is constrained by publication bias and by heterogeneous operationalisations of social support and performance; however, the contextual focus on Malaysian SMEs increases practical relevance for the journal's audience and yields a clear, testable framework for subsequent empirical studies (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016). In sum, Table 1 maps the four workplace stressors, their expected effects on employee performance, and the moderating role of social support.

Table 2 presents the conceptual map, indicating SMEs require more operational guidance on how to apply support.

Table 2. Conceptual framework map and expected relationships.

Link examined	Moderator	Rationale (theory-based)	Expected direction	Exemplar sources
<i>The relationship between role ambiguity and employee performance</i>	Social support (informational; supervisory)	Support clarifies expectations and reduces uncertainty, improving appraisal and coping; resources buffer demands	Negative main effect; support weakens the negative link	Rizzo et al., 1970; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Johnson & Hall, 1988; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017
The relationship between role conflict and employee performance	Social support (emotional; coworker)	Support reduces strain from incompatible expectations and preserves attentional resources	Negative main effect; support weakens the negative link	Rizzo et al., 1970; Johnson & Hall, 1988; Blau, 1964
The relationship between workload and employee performance	Social support (instrumental)	Practical assistance and resource provision offset quantitative and qualitative overload	Negative main effect; support weakens the negative link	Van Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017
Job insecurity and its effect on employee performance	Social support (organizational and familial)	Support protects valued resources and sustains motivation under threat	Negative main effect; support weakens the negative link	De Witte, 2005; Hobfoll, 1989; Zimet et al., 1988
The influence of workplace stressors, in aggregate, on employee performance (task, contextual, and adaptive dimensions)	Social support (multi-source)	Resources buffer demands; reciprocal, fair exchanges strengthen buffering	Negative aggregate effect; multi-source support weakens the negative link	Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Blau, 1964; Tsui et al., 2013

Table 3 aligns each stressor with its dominant mechanism, the type of high-leverage support most relevant in SMEs, and the expected effect on performance when such support is present.

Table 3. Stressor–support alignment and expected performance effect.

Stressor in SMEs	Dominant mechanism undermining performance	High-leverage support in SMEs	Expected effect on performance when support is present	Key anchors
Role ambiguity	Uncertainty about goals, standards, and decision latitude disrupts planning and execution	Supervisory informational support that clarifies tasks, priorities, and authority	Negative main effect reduced through clearer appraisal and coping	Rizzo et al., 1970; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Johnson and Hall, 1988
Role conflict	Incompatible expectations drain attention and increase strain	Coworker emotional support that normalises tensions and coordinates expectations	Negative main effect reduced via strain relief and coordination	Johnson and Hall, 1988; Blau, 1964
Workload	Quantitative/qualitative overload depletes energy and accuracy	Instrumental support that adds time, tools, or help on tasks	Negative main effect reduced through resource replenishment	Van Veldhoven and Meijman, 1994; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017
Job insecurity	Threat to valued job features reduces commitment and effort	Organisational assurance and family backing that stabilise expectations	Negative main effect reduced via resource protection and motivation	De Witte, 2005; Hobfoll, 1989; Zimet et al., 1988

This alignment underscores that support must be tailored to the specific stressor rather than delivered in a generic manner, thereby bridging theory to actionable implications for SME managers.

4. Findings and Discussions

This review set out to clarify how workplace stressors shape employee performance in Malaysian SMEs and how social support can moderate these effects. Synthesising evidence across management and health psychology, it affirms that chronic demands in small firms, especially role ambiguity, role conflict, workload, and job insecurity, erode performance by exhausting cognitive and emotional resources. The concern is salient in Malaysia, where multiple indicators point to rising work stress with attendant economic costs (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023; Employment Hero, 2024; Institute for Public Health, 2024; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; World Health Organization, 2024). The integration of the Job Demands Resources model, the Demand Control Support tradition, Stress and Coping theory, and Social Exchange Theory suggests that targeted support from supervisors, coworkers, the organisation, and family can buffer the link from stressor to performance when support is timely, well matched to the problem, and embedded in reciprocal and fair relationships (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Blau, 1964; Johnson & Hall, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

A concept-centric synthesis anchored constructs to canonical measures to maintain definitional precision for future testing. Role ambiguity and role conflict align with Rizzo, et al. (1970). Workload follows Van Veldhoven and Meijman (1994). Job insecurity follows De Witte (2005). Social support follows Zimet et al. (1988). Employee performance facets follow Tsui, Lin, and Yu (2013). Read against Malaysian SME realities of lean staffing, fluid roles, and informal coordination, the evidence converges on a consistent pattern. Each stressor is expected to show a negative main effect on performance, and appropriately matched support attenuates that effect (Dousin et al., 2019; Khaw & Chelliah, 2024; Susanto et al., 2022).

The main practical implication is straightforward yet consequential: match the type and source of support to the dominant performance bottleneck. Supervisory informational support lowers uncertainty when roles are unclear. Collegial emotional support reduces tension where expectations collide. Instrumental support in the form of time, tools, and extra hands offsets workload pressures in lean teams. Organisational or familial assurance helps employees sustain effort when job continuity feels threatened. Where support is reciprocal and perceived as fair, buffering is stronger because employees conserve and reinvest resources and are more willing to reciprocate with effort and cooperation (Blau, 1964; Hobfoll, 1989; Johnson & Hall, 1988; Zimet et al., 1988).

The contribution is necessarily provisional because no primary data were collected. Future research in Malaysian SMEs should test these propositions using multi-source and multi-wave designs that can estimate moderation and explore potential non-linear patterns in the interaction between stressors and support, while attending to cultural norms that shape the meaning and impact of support (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). Studies can also examine whether support effectiveness varies across micro, small, and medium firms and under different competitive and regulatory conditions in Malaysia.

In a nutshell, performance in Malaysian SMEs depends not only on the level of demand but also on the availability and quality of social support that is properly matched to those demands. By specifying what to support, how to support, and from whom, this review offers a context-sensitive framework that can guide empirical testing and immediate managerial action in resource-constrained settings (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023; Khaw & Chelliah, 2024).

5. Conclusions

This conceptual review explains why and how core workplace stressors, namely role ambiguity, role conflict, workload, and job insecurity, are expected to depress employee performance in Malaysian SMEs, and why social support should weaken these adverse links. By integrating the Job Demands and Resources model, the Demand Control Support tradition, Stress and Coping Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, the review shows that well matched, timely, and reciprocal support preserves cognitive and emotional resources that would otherwise be depleted by chronic demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Blau, 1964; Johnson & Hall, 1988; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The framework is anchored to canonical measures to enable clean operationalisation in subsequent empirical work, drawing on established scales for role stressors, workload, job insecurity, social support, and employee performance (De Witte, 2005; Rizzo et al., 1970; Tsui et al., 2013; Van Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994; Zimet et al., 1988). Read against the realities of Malaysian SMEs' lean staffing, fluid roles, and informal coordination, the propositions offer a parsimonious, testable path to performance protection in a context where national data indicate

rising work stress and meaningful economic costs (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023; Employment Hero, 2024; Institute for Public Health, 2024; World Health Organization, 2024). Table 3 summarises the synthesis, practical implications for Malaysian SMEs, and priorities for future research.

For practice, the central implication is to align the form and source of support with the dominant bottleneck. Informational guidance from supervisors fits ambiguity, emotional collegiality helps when expectations collide, instrumental help offsets overload in lean teams, and credible organisational assurance sustains effort under insecurity. Where support is perceived as fair and reciprocal, employees are more likely to conserve and reinvest effort, amplifying the buffering effect on performance (Blau, 1964; Hobfoll, 1989). Future studies in Malaysian SMEs should test these moderation claims using multi-source, multi-wave designs, probe non-linearities in the interaction between stressors and support, and consider linguistic and cultural contingencies that may condition the potency of different support types across micro, small, and medium firms (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005).

In sum, performance in Malaysian SMEs depends not only on the level of demand employees face but also on how precisely leaders and colleagues provide support. By specifying what to support, how to support, and by whom, this review delivers a concise, context-sensitive map for empirical testing and immediate action in resource-constrained settings (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bank Negara Malaysia, 2023; Khaw & Chelliah, 2024).

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No new data were created or analysed in this study. Materials supporting the review, including search protocols and synthesis notes, are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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