



## The Effect of Toxic Leadership on Turnover Intention among Retail Employees in Indonesia: A Post-COVID-19 Quantitative Study

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### ABSTRACT

*This quantitative study analyzes the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention in the retail sector in Indonesia in the post-COVID-19 context. Using an explanatory research approach with the PLS-SEM method, data were collected from 170 employees through a purposive sampling technique. The analysis results show that toxic leadership has a very strong positive and significant influence on turnover intention ( $\beta = 0.850$ ,  $t = 16.440$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Toxic leadership is able to explain the variation in turnover intention by 72.0%, The effect size value of  $f^2 = 2.550$  indicates a very large effect. Key findings indicate that the Negative Spiritual State which is toxic leadership dimension is the most dominant behavioral manifestation. This is characterized by negative emotional outbursts in leaders, such as high volume, erratic moods, and inconsistent behavior that create uncertainty for subordinates. Retail companies must prioritize improving the quality of first-line leadership and establishing safe feedback mechanisms. Without intervention in leadership culture, other employee retention strategies will be difficult to maintain effectively, which may threaten the company's operational stability.*

**Keyword:** Toxic Leadership, Turnover Intention, Retail Sector, Employee Turnover, PLS-SEM

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Human resources are a crucial factor in achieving organizational success in a dynamic and competitive business environment. The quality, stability, and commitment of employees determine how effectively an organization can implement its strategy, maintain service quality, and achieve operational efficiency (Ntseke et al., 2022). This issue is particularly important in the retail industry because retail companies rely heavily on employees who interact directly with customers and are involved in daily operational activities. Therefore, the sustainability of

retail organizations is not only determined by market conditions and business strategy but also by the ability of companies to retain competent employees.

The retail sector has specific work characteristics that make employee retention a major managerial challenge. Retail employees are required to provide fast and responsive customer service, work under target-oriented conditions, adapt to shifting schedules, and deal with high levels of customer interaction. These job characteristics may create work pressure, especially when employees perceive limited career development opportunities or more accessible employment alternatives in similar companies (Nguyen et al., 2022). Consequently, employee turnover has become one of the recurring issues in the retail industry. High turnover can disrupt operational continuity, increase recruitment and training costs, reduce service consistency, and weaken organizational performance (Chibvongodze et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, turnover intention in the retail sector deserves greater attention because the trade sector is one of the largest labor-absorbing sectors. Data from Badan Pusat Statistik indicate that Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles and Motorcycles accounted for 17.95% of Indonesia's employed population in February 2026 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2026). In addition, Bank Indonesia's Retail Sales Survey showed that retail sales continued to move dynamically after the pandemic, as reflected in the March 2026 Real Sales Index, which was predicted to grow by 2.4% year-on-year and 9.3% month-to-month (Bank Indonesia, 2026). These data indicate that the retail sector remains economically important and operationally active; however, this condition also requires companies to maintain workforce stability amid changing consumer demand, cost efficiency pressures, and increasingly competitive business conditions.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indonesian retail sector has faced significant adjustments due to changes in economic conditions and consumer behavior (Kustiyono et al., 2022). Many retail companies have responded to these pressures by adjusting work systems, reducing operational costs, optimizing employee numbers, closing or restructuring outlets, and increasing efficiency demands. These changes may affect employees' perceptions of job security and organizational stability. When employees experience uncertainty, increased workload due to workforce reduction, limited support from supervisors, or pressure to meet higher efficiency targets, they may begin to evaluate alternative employment opportunities. Thus, post-pandemic operational pressure can contribute to the emergence of turnover intention among retail employees.

Employee turnover intention is influenced by various factors, including job characteristics, working conditions, compensation, organizational support, and leadership style. In the retail context, work environment conditions and supervisor behavior have been found to be closely related to employees' intention to leave the organization (Ali et al., 2025). Leadership is therefore an important factor because leaders shape employees' work experiences, provide direction, distribute workloads, and influence the psychological climate within the workplace. A constructive leadership style can strengthen employee commitment, whereas a destructive leadership style may create dissatisfaction, stress, and a desire to leave the organization (Baloyi, 2020; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020).

One form of destructive leadership that may increase turnover intention is toxic leadership. Toxic leadership refers to a pattern of leader attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that prioritize personal interests and produce negative consequences for subordinates, the organization, and overall organizational performance (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). Toxic leaders may display authoritarian behavior, intimidation, manipulation, unfair treatment, excessive control, and a lack of empathy toward employees. Such behavior can create unnecessary psychological pressure and stress, reduce employee motivation, weaken engagement, increase absenteeism, and encourage employees to leave the organization (Naeem & Khurram, 2020; Oh et al., 2026). In the retail sector, toxic leadership may be especially harmful because employees already face high service demands, customer pressure, and operational targets.

Although studies on turnover intention have been widely conducted, several gaps remain. First, many previous studies in the retail sector have focused on factors such as workload, work engagement, job satisfaction, compensation, and organizational support, while the role of toxic leadership has received relatively limited attention. Second, studies on toxic leadership and turnover intention have often been conducted in broader organizational contexts, whereas empirical evidence in the Indonesian retail sector remains limited. Third, the post-pandemic retail context requires further examination because employees are working under new patterns of uncertainty, efficiency pressure, and organizational restructuring. These gaps indicate the need for further research that specifically examines toxic leadership as a predictor of turnover intention among retail employees in Indonesia.

This study offers several contributions. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on toxic leadership and turnover intention by examining the effect of negative leadership behavior in the retail sector. Empirically, this study provides evidence from the Indonesian retail context, which remains underrepresented in previous research. The research question in this study is how the toxic leadership variable influences turnover intention among employees working in the retail sector. "Furthermore, this study aims to provide insight into how negative leadership behavior influences employees' decisions to stay in or leave the organization". Further discussion of this will be explained in the next section of this study.

## 1.1 Toxic Leadership

The concept of toxic leadership was first introduced by Dr. Marcia Lynn Whicker and has since been used to describe destructive leadership behavior that weakens employee morale, reduces productivity, and harms organizational performance (Orunbon et al., 2025). In general, toxic leadership refers to a pattern of leader behavior characterized by low integrity, dishonesty, selfishness, arrogance, excessive personal ambition, and the tendency to maintain power without considering the welfare of subordinates (Semedo et al., 2022). In the leadership literature, this concept is often associated with the "dark side of leadership" because it reflects leader characteristics and behaviors that endanger employee well-being and organizational effectiveness (Acuña & Male, 2024). Toxic leaders may also display intimidating, threatening, verbally aggressive, selfish, and harmful behavior toward followers and the organization in which they work (Wolor et al., 2022).

The emergence of toxic leadership can also be understood through the toxic triangle perspective, which explains that destructive leadership is not produced only by the personal traits of leaders but also by the interaction between destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and a conducive organizational environment (Naeem & Khurram, 2020). Thus, toxic leadership may become stronger when organizational systems allow intimidation, manipulation, excessive control, or unethical treatment to occur repeatedly. In this sense, toxic leadership does not always refer to violent or unlawful behavior. Rather, it can appear in more subtle forms, such as manipulative communication, authoritarian decision-making, humiliation, emotional volatility, unfair treatment, and the deliberate weakening of subordinates' confidence and performance (Octavian, 2023).

Other scholars define toxic leaders as individuals who are authoritarian, emotionally unstable, lacking in emotional intelligence, selfish, insensitive, and inclined to use harmful managerial strategies to manipulate subordinates (Aslan, 2025). Toxic leaders also tend to exhibit authoritarian and narcissistic behavior in organizational settings (Ahmed et al., 2025). These behaviors may be reflected in actions such as demoralizing subordinates, isolating or marginalizing employees, making themselves difficult to approach, causing emotional distress, engaging in unethical practices, and shaping employees' perceptions in ways that strengthen the leader's authority while weakening employees' ability to perform effectively.

Most studies on toxic leadership emphasize the detrimental personal characteristics of leaders and their negative consequences for employees and organizations (Orunbon et al., 2025). Toxic leadership can create a harmful work environment that decreases job satisfaction, increases turnover intention, and encourages employee behavior that violates organizational norms and regulations (Ahmed et al., 2024). Previous research has also considered socio-demographic differences, including gender, in employees' perceptions of toxic leadership (Semedo et al., 2022). However, such findings should be interpreted cautiously and should not be generalized as fixed gender-based differences. In this study, the main focus is not on gender differences, but on how toxic leadership as a leadership behavior may influence employees' intention to leave the organization.

## 1.2 Turnover Intention

Turnover intention refers to an employee's perceived likelihood of staying in or leaving an organization (Dahri et al., 2023). It can also be understood as an employee's tendency or intention to leave an organization, while turnover itself refers to the actual act of leaving a job (Rangrez et al., 2022). In other words, turnover intention is an early psychological signal that employees are considering leaving their current workplace for various reasons, including the desire to obtain better employment opportunities. When employees experience high job satisfaction, they tend to develop stronger engagement with the organization, which can reduce the possibility of turnover (Situmorang & Wardhani, 2022).

In the retail sector, turnover intention is particularly relevant because retail work is often characterized by direct interaction with customers, sales targets, shift-based schedules, high service demands, and close supervision from store managers or supervisors. Employees in retail organizations are frequently required to maintain service quality while also responding to

customer complaints, operational pressure, and performance targets. Under these conditions, the behavior of supervisors becomes highly important because employees interact with direct leaders in daily operational activities. When employees perceive that their supervisors are unfair, intimidating, unsupportive, or emotionally harmful, their intention to leave the organization may increase.

High turnover intention produces serious consequences for organizations. It not only increases financial costs related to recruitment, selection, and training, but also contributes to lower work performance and productivity, which may ultimately reduce customer satisfaction (Rangrez et al., 2022). Turnover intention can also create an uncondusive work environment because employees who intend to leave may show lower morale, reduced commitment, and weaker involvement in organizational activities (Suganda, 2022). For retail companies, these consequences are especially important because employee instability can directly affect service consistency, store operations, and customer experience.

Managing turnover intention is often associated with several organizational factors, including job satisfaction, job insecurity, rewards, recognition, career development opportunities, and appreciation for employee achievement. Motivational factors such as recognition, opportunities for development, and appreciation can increase job satisfaction and reduce employees' intention to leave (Gunawan et al., 2024). However, because this study focuses on toxic leadership and turnover intention, job satisfaction and related motivational factors are positioned as supporting theoretical explanations rather than as the main variables. The central argument of this study is that leadership behavior, particularly toxic leadership, can become an important antecedent of employees' intention to leave the organization.

### **1.3 Hypothesis Development**

#### **1.3.1 Toxic Leadership and Turnover Intention**

Toxic leadership is closely related to turnover intention because destructive leader behavior can weaken employees' psychological attachment to the organization. Leaders who intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, ignore employee contributions, or prioritize personal interests may create emotional pressure and reduce employees' willingness to remain in the organization. In this condition, employees may perceive leaving the organization as a way to escape from an unhealthy work environment. Therefore, toxic leadership can be understood as a leadership-related factor that increases turnover intention among employees.

The relationship between toxic leadership and turnover intention is also relevant in the retail context. Retail employees depend heavily on direct supervisors for scheduling, task allocation, performance evaluation, and daily operational guidance. When supervisory behavior becomes toxic, employees may experience lower motivation, reduced satisfaction, increased stress, and weaker loyalty to the organization. Previous studies indicate that toxic leadership can increase turnover intention by creating a toxic work environment and reducing positive employee attitudes (Naeem & Khurram, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2024). In addition, turnover intention itself has been shown to create negative organizational consequences, including reduced productivity, lower morale, and potential customer dissatisfaction (Rangrez et al., 2022; Suganda, 2022).

Based on the theoretical explanation above, this study assumes that toxic leadership is positively associated with turnover intention. The more employees perceive their leaders as toxic, the stronger their intention to leave the organization. Therefore, the hypothesis proposed in this study is:

**H1:** Toxic leadership has a positive effect on turnover intention among retail employees.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design to examine the effect of toxic leadership on turnover intention among retail sector employees. The population in this study is all employees working in retail sector companies in Indonesia. Considering the population is broad and not all members of the population can be reached, this study uses a non-probability sampling technique with a purposive sampling approach, namely selecting respondents who meet the following criteria: (1) active employee status at a retail company, and (2) have a minimum work period of 3 months to have adequate experience in interacting with superiors (Ferdinand, 2014).

Determining the sample size for PLS-SEM analysis, namely the minimum sample size, is 5 times the number of indicators in the measurement model (Hair & Alamer, 2022). This study used a total of 34 indicators, so the minimum sample size required is  $34 \times 5 = 170$  respondents. Therefore, this study sets a minimum of 170 retail company employees as the research sample.

Data collection was conducted through a questionnaire survey as primary data distributed to retail company employees who met the sample criteria, both online and offline, with a Likert scale of 1–5 (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to measure the variables of toxic leadership and turnover intention; before analysis, data were screened to ensure completeness and consistency of answers and to handle invalid responses. Data analysis used the Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach with SmartPLS through evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) including reliability and validity tests (outer loading, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, AVE, and discriminant validity/HTMT) (Hair & Alamer, 2022), followed by evaluation of the structural model (inner model) including  $R^2$ ,  $f^2$ , and hypothesis testing was carried out using bootstrapping to obtain t-statistic and p-value values at a significance level of 5%.

## 3. RESEARCH RESULT

Measurement model testing (outer model) was conducted to ensure the research instrument met validity and reliability criteria. The results of construct reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity tests are presented as follows:

Table 1. Construct Validity & Reliability

| Construct              | Cronbach's Alpha | rho_A | Composite Reliability | AVE  | Heterotrait – Monotrait |                        |
|------------------------|------------------|-------|-----------------------|------|-------------------------|------------------------|
|                        |                  |       |                       |      | Toxic Leadership (X)    | Turnover Intention (Y) |
| Toxic Leadership (X)   | 0.96             | 0.97  | 0.97                  | 0.71 |                         |                        |
| Turnover Intention (Y) | 0.97             | 0.98  | 0.98                  | 0.73 | <b>0.86</b>             |                        |

Source: primary data (2026).

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Based on Table 1, the Toxic Leadership (X) and Turnover Intention (Y) constructs demonstrate excellent measurement quality. Internal reliability is also strongly met, as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.960 (X) and 0.970 (Y) and Composite Reliability of 0.970 (X) and 0.980 (Y) (all >0.700). Furthermore, convergent validity is declared fulfilled because the AVE value is 0.710 for Toxic Leadership and 0.730 for Turnover Intention (both >0.500), which means the constructs are able to adequately explain the indicator variance. Discriminant validity is also met based on HTMT = 0.860 (<0.900), so that the two constructs can be considered conceptually different and worthy of use in further structural analysis.

Meanwhile, Figure 1 shows that all indicators in the Toxic Leadership (X) and Turnover Intention (Y) constructs show outer loadings in the range of 0.730–0.920, thus fulfilling the indicator validity criteria ( $\geq 0.700$ ).

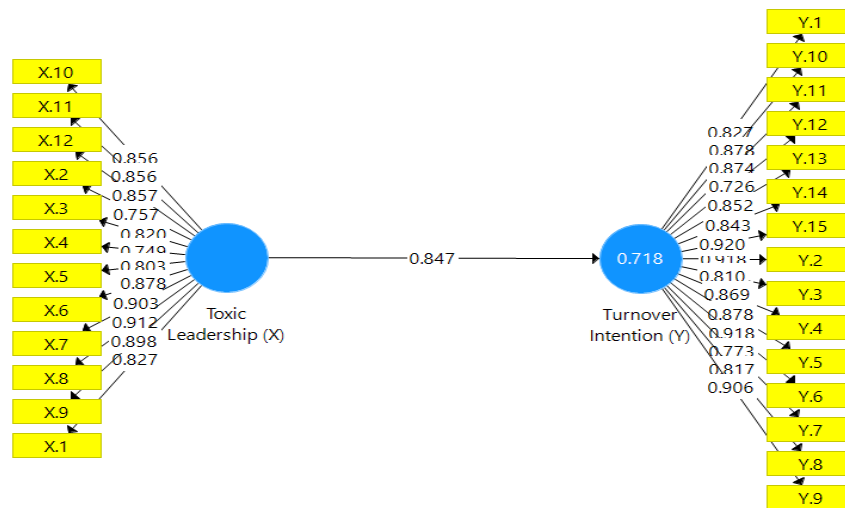


Figure 1. PLS-SEM Outer Model Results

Table 2. Structural Model Evaluation and Hypothesis Testing

| Connection                                    | $R^2$ | $R^2_{Adjusted}$ | $f^2$ | Path Coefficient ( $\beta$ ) | $t$ -statistic | $p$ -value | Decision            |
|---|-------|------------------|-------|------------------------------|----------------|------------|---------------------|
| Toxic Leadership (X) → Turnover Intention (Y) | 0.72  | 0.71             | 2.55  | 0.85                         | 16.44          | 0.000      | <i>H1 Supported</i> |

Source: primary data (2026).

In the inner model evaluation, the Turnover Intention (Y) construct has an  $R^2$  value of 0.720 (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.710$ ), which indicates that 72.0% of the variation in turnover intention of retail sector employees can be explained by toxic leadership, while the rest is influenced by other factors outside the model. The effect size ( $f^2$ ) value of 2.550 indicates that the influence of toxic leadership on turnover intention is classified as very large. In the hypothesis test, the coefficient path  $\beta = 0.850$  has a positive value with a  $t$ -statistic = 16.440 and a  $p$ -value <0.001 (<0.05), so it can be concluded that toxic leadership has a positive and significant influence on turnover intention; the more employees perceive toxic leadership, the higher their intentions to leave the company.

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Table 3. Characteristics of Retail Employee Respondents

| Characteristics  | Category                         | Frequency (f) | Percentage (%) |
|------------------|----------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender           | Male                             | 81            | 48%            |
|                  | Female                           | 89            | 52%            |
| Age              | <21 years                        | 10            | 6%             |
|                  | 21-25 Years                      | 44            | 26%            |
|                  | 26-30 Years                      | 77            | 45%            |
|                  | 31-35 Years                      | 17            | 10%            |
|                  | 36-40 Years                      | 11            | 6%             |
|                  | 41-45 Years                      | 4             | 2%             |
|                  | <1 Year                          | 60            | 35%            |
| Years of service | 1-5 Years                        | 79            | 46%            |
|                  | 6-10 Years                       | 18            | 11%            |
|                  | >10 Years                        | 13            | 8%             |
| Education        | Senior High School or Equivalent | 80            | 47%            |
|                  | Diploma                          | 5             | 3%             |
|                  | Bachelor's Degree (S1)           | 64            | 38%            |
|                  | Master's Degree                  | 21            | 12%            |

Source: primary data (2026).

The characteristics of retail employees in Indonesia are predominantly female, with the largest age group being 26–30 years, the most years of service lasting 1–5 years, and the most common education level being high school or equivalent. This pattern indicates that many retail workers are in the early to mid-career phases and at the operational level, so the impact of toxic leadership has the potential to quickly drive turnover intention due to the need for job stability and dependence on the quality of daily supervision. Consequently, retail companies need to prioritize improving first-line leadership behavior, supervisor training, and control or feedback mechanisms to reduce turnover intentions and increase retention.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Dominant Indicators

| Variables                     | Indicator highest        | Item code | Question items  | Average indicator | Category |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|---|-------------------|----------|
| <b>Toxic Leadership (X)</b>   | Negative Spiritual State | X.10      | My leader expresses negative emotions through a raised voice.                 | 3.113             | Moderate |
|                               |                          | X.11      | My boss's mood affects the work atmosphere.                                   | 3.113             | Moderate |
|                               |                          | X.12      | My supervisor's behavior often changes and is inconsistent.                   | 3.113             | Moderate |
| <b>Turnover Intention (Y)</b> | Expectation              | Y.10      | Health facilities or insurance benefits are not proportional to the workload. | 3,405             | Moderate |
|                               |                          | Y.11      | I will leave this job if I get another offer.                                 | 3,405             | Moderate |
|                               |                          | Y.12      | I prefer to work in a place that provides rewards and recognition.            | 3,405             | Moderate |

### **3.1. The Influence of Toxic Leadership on Turnover Intention**

The results of this study confirm that leadership style is a crucial factor capable of creating both positive and negative impacts on an organization. The toxic leadership phenomenon found in this study proved to be a major driver of increased employee intention to leave the company. Based on the results of the hypothesis test, the path coefficient  $\beta = 0.850$  is positive with a t-statistic = 16.440 and a p-value  $<0.001$  ( $<0.05$ ), thus confirming that toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on turnover intention. These results are very consistent with a recent study by Soomro et al. (2024), which highlighted that in a target-oriented work environment, toxic leadership behavior drastically triggers an increase in turnover intention due to damage to employee psychological well-being. Likewise, Paltu & Brouwers (2020) stated that leadership plays a significant role in determining organizational success, but a toxic leadership style actually triggers disloyalty among subordinates. The higher employees' perceptions of their leader's toxicity, the stronger their desire to resign. Leaders who exhibit negative characteristics make it difficult for employees to stay, resulting in a very high intention to leave.

### **3.2 Toxic Leadership Behavior in the Retail Sector**

In the retail industry, toxic leadership is particularly intense due to the extreme pressure of a work culture oriented towards daily sales targets, where leaders often ignore empathy and use intimidation to achieve numbers. This is exacerbated by a rigid hierarchical structure and absolute power control over schedules and performance appraisals, so leaders who lack adequate emotional intelligence tend to vent the stress of high workloads on their subordinates. Leaders who frequently express negative emotions through loudness, have unstable moods, and behave inconsistently create severe emotional stress for subordinates. These leadership characteristics are often referred to as the "dark side of leadership," referring to behavior that is detrimental to employee well-being. Based on indicator analysis, the Negative Spiritual State dimension was the most dominant manifestation of toxic behavior felt by respondents, with an average score of 3.113. Employees perceived their leaders often express negative emotions through loudness or shouting (X.10), have moods that disrupt the work climate (X.11), and behave inconsistently (X.12). This condition is emphasized by the findings of Suryosukmono et al., (2023), who revealed that this kind of destructive behavior systematically destroys employees' perceptions of the leader's integrity and eliminates the meaningfulness of work. This loss of trust in the leader's integrity and increased psychological stress ultimately significantly trigger turnover intention, where employees view resignation as the only solution to escape an unhealthy work environment.

### **3.3 Dynamics of Turnover Intention in Retail Employees**

Turnover intention among retail employees is influenced by individual perceptions of the likelihood of remaining or leaving the organization. These findings indicate that employees tend to have high expectations for rewards and recognition in the workplace. When benefits or health insurance are perceived as disproportionate to the high workload, employee motivation will decrease. According to Suganda (2022), turnover intention has a broad negative impact by creating a non-conducive work environment. Given the nature of the retail industry, which

demands direct interaction with customers and high work pressure, the quality of daily supervision is a determining factor in employee retention. Dissatisfaction with leadership styles, coupled with the relatively easy job opportunities in the retail sector, accelerates employees' decisions to seek jobs perceived as more stable and that appreciate their contributions.

## **4. CLOSING STATEMENT**

### **4.1. Conclusion**

This study aims to analyze and explain the influence of toxic leadership on employee intention to leave an organization in the retail sector in Indonesia. Specifically, this study seeks to provide in-depth insight into how negative leadership behaviors can influence employees' strategic decisions to stay or leave the company. Furthermore, this study aims to identify the most dominant dimensions of toxic behavior experienced by the retail workforce in order to provide recommendations for human resource management in improving employee retention amidst the highly competitive dynamics of the industry.

The PLS-SEM results indicate that toxic leadership has a positive and significant effect on turnover intention. This finding demonstrates that the more toxic leadership behavior employees perceive, the stronger their desire to seek employment elsewhere to avoid a psychologically unhealthy work environment. The most intense manifestations of toxic behavior experienced by respondents relate to negative leadership emotions, such as a tendency to express anger through loud voices, erratic moods, and inconsistent behavioral patterns in daily interactions.

### **4.2. Suggestions**

Based on these findings, retail companies are advised to pay special attention to improving leadership quality at the operational level through emotional intelligence and conflict management training for supervisors, enabling them to manage work pressure without exhibiting destructive behavior toward subordinates. Companies also need to establish safe and transparent feedback mechanisms, allowing employees to report toxic behavior without fear of intimidation, to detect leadership issues early. Furthermore, management should review reward and health insurance policies to make them more competitive and balanced with workload, thereby maintaining employee motivation and loyalty. Through a more humane and consistent approach, companies are expected to create a conducive work climate, restore employee trust in the organization's integrity, and ultimately significantly reduce employee turnover.

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