



Examining the Detrimental Impact of “Kiss Up, Kick Down” Office Culture in Vietnam: A Qualitative Exploration using Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the “Kiss up, kick down” culture in Vietnamese educational institutions and understand its implications on teachers at different stages of their career: novice, mid-career, and near-end. Using a qualitative approach, 15 participants were interviewed. The thematic analysis of interview data resulted in the identification of fifteen themes. They highlighted a pervasive culture driven by power dynamics and hierarchy, impacting interpersonal relationships, job satisfaction, professional growth, and mental well-being. Additionally, the culture was found to align with societal norms and was seen as a reflection of the collective culture and historical influences in Vietnam. The study underscores the need for systemic change and offers insights that could inform policy and practice aimed at creating healthier and more inclusive academic environments.

Keywords: *Kiss Up, Kick Down Culture, Vietnamese Educational Institutions, Qualitative Study, Prouded Theory*



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of “Kiss up, kick down”, where employees are courteous and flattery towards superiors but disrespectful or even hostile towards subordinates, can significantly impact workplace culture, relationships, and ultimately the organization’s performance (Laguda, 2021). This study combines a theoretical review and a qualitative exploration to uncover the multifaceted impacts and consequences of such office culture. In recent years, numerous studies have sought to elucidate various aspects of organizational behavior, culture, and the social intricacies that define the workplace environment (e.g., Uhl-Bien et al., 2020; Spcier, 2020; Leslie et al., 2021). While some of these studies have touched upon the behavioral dynamics of “kissing up and kicking down” (e.g., West, 2022), there is limited research focusing specifically on the negative effects of this culture. The need to fill this gap in research constitutes the prime rationale for this study.

The Vietnamese workplace offers a unique setting to explore this phenomenon. In the context of Vietnam’s fast-growing economy, the nature and dynamics of office culture have gained increasing importance (Nguyen & Van Truong, 2021). While there is substantial literature on various aspects of Vietnamese corporate culture (e.g., Quang, 2021), few studies

have investigated the role of this particular phenomenon in shaping office dynamics. In the academic literature, the concept of “kiss up, kick down” has its roots in organizational psychology, leadership, and management studies (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020; West, 2022). It relates to concepts such as upward ingratiation (Kim et al., 2022), workplace bullying (Hoel et al., 2020), power dynamics (Li et al., 2017), and organizational justice (Cropanzano et al., 2018). The contextual framework for this study is grounded in these theoretical bases.

The introduction to this study first provides a contextual background of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture, especially in the Vietnamese context. It then explores the theoretical backgrounds from which this culture emerges and the literature on its impacts. Finally, the study identifies the gaps in current knowledge that it seeks to address. Through a grounded theory approach, this study seeks to generate new theoretical insights into this complex social phenomenon in the Vietnamese context.

METHODS

Research Design

The research design for this study employs a qualitative approach, specifically grounded theory, which allows for an in-depth understanding of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture within Vietnamese offices. Grounded theory is chosen for its effectiveness in developing theory directly from data, providing a means of examining the complex social interactions and their significance within the workplace. The study follows Oktay’s (2012) grounded theory methodology, employing open, axial, and selective coding procedures for data analysis.

The theoretical frameworks underpinning the study are derived from organizational behavior, leadership, and power dynamics literature. This multi-disciplinary perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. First, “Organizational Behavior” helps in understanding how individuals and groups behave within an organization, focusing on patterns of human behavior and its impact on workplace culture (Hit et al., 2017). Second, the “Leadership Studies” framework offers insights into different leadership styles and how they influence employees’ behaviors. It helps to analyze the role of leaders in promoting or discouraging the “Kiss up, kick down” culture (Learmonth & Morrell, 2017). Finally, the “Power Dynamics” framework explains how power is distributed and exercised within organizations (Li et al., 2017). This framework is crucial to understanding the nature and effects of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture, as it directly relates to the relationships between employees at different hierarchical levels.

Participants

The participants for this study comprise a diverse range of tertiary teachers from Vietnam. The total sample includes fifteen teachers classified according to their career stages: five novices (with less than five years of experience), five mid-career teachers (with 5 to 15 years of experience), and five near-end career teachers (with over 15 years of experience). This diverse sample was selected to provide a broad spectrum of experiences and perspectives, thus enriching the understanding of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture in the academic workplace setting. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, specifically criterion-based selection. This method ensures that all participants have experienced the phenomenon under investigation, hence contributing valuable insights. The career-stage criteria further ensured a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon across different career phases, potentially capturing any evolution or changes over time. The teachers were from various tertiary institutions across Vietnam, representing both urban and rural settings, thus enhancing the geographical representativeness of the study.

Before commencing the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidential and anonymous handling of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation. They were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. Anonymity was ensured by assigning each participant a unique code, thereby concealing their identity in the research report. Confidentiality was maintained by securely storing the interview recordings and transcripts and limiting their access to the research team only. Further, participants were ensured that the findings would be reported in a way that generalizes the data, eliminating the possibility of individual identification. Emotional wellbeing was also considered, with participants being made aware that they could stop the interview or skip any questions that made them uncomfortable. Throughout the study, all research activities were performed adhering strictly to ethical considerations, respecting the rights and dignity of all participants.

Data Collection Instruments

The study employs a two-pronged approach to data collection - semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews. This strategy allows for a comprehensive exploration of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture from multiple perspectives while maintaining the ability to capture individual experiences in depth.

Semi-structured Interviews

The first instrument employed in the study is the semi-structured interview. The interviews were designed to gain a deep understanding of the personal experiences and perceptions of each participant about the “Kiss up, kick down” culture. Semi-structured interviews have the benefit of providing a detailed account of the participant’s experience while allowing the flexibility for the researcher to explore unanticipated insights. The interview guide was developed around key themes, such as the participant’s understanding of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture, their personal experiences, and the observed impact on the organization and individuals.

Focus Group Interviews

Following individual interviews, focus group interviews were conducted. Each focus group consisted of five participants from the same career stage. The rationale for employing focus groups was to stimulate discussions and interactions among participants that can reveal collective experiences, group norms, shared understandings, and discrepancies about the “Kiss up, kick down” culture. Moreover, focus groups are instrumental in identifying group-level dynamics, which might not surface during individual interviews. The group setting also provides a sense of collective identity, encouraging participants to share their experiences more openly.

The choice to conduct semi-structured interviews first followed by focus group interviews is intentional. Initial individual interviews would allow participants to express personal experiences and perspectives without the influence of others, thus providing an authentic account of their understanding and experiences. The subsequent focus groups, informed by the themes emerging from the individual interviews, enabled the exploration of these themes in a collective setting. This sequence allowed the researchers to delve deeper into the dynamics of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture by comparing individual experiences with collective perspectives, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness and richness of the data. All interviews, both individual and focus group, were digitally recorded with the consent of participants and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study followed a thematic analysis approach, which is well-suited to uncover, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. The process was carried out in several stages as outlined by Braun et al. (2023). The first stage involved familiarizing ourselves with the data. This was done by reading and re-reading the transcriptions from both individual and focus group interviews, making notes and highlighting interesting features that began to form initial ideas. Next, initial codes were generated. Coding is a process of organizing the data by segmenting and labeling the text. In this study, we used inductive coding, creating codes based on the data rather than pre-established codes. The third stage involved searching for themes among the coded data. This was accomplished by gathering all data relevant to each potential theme and collating them together. In the fourth stage, the themes were reviewed and refined. This involved two levels of reviewing. At the first level, we considered the collated data for each theme and ensured they formed a coherent pattern. At the second level, we reviewed the validity of individual themes in relation to the dataset. Themes were then defined and refined, which required an ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. The final stage involved producing the report. This report provides a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story the data tells - within and across themes. The report illustrates the themes using compelling extract examples and relates back the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis. This iterative process of thematic analysis provided a flexible and useful research tool, which provided a rich, detailed, and complex account of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The data analysis generated fifteen key themes: perceived pressure to conform, conflict between personal values and professional survival, impact on trust and organizational culture, impact on professional growth and development, effect on mental well-being, desire for change, ingrained cultural practices, power dynamics and hierarchy, impact on interpersonal relationships, diminished job satisfaction, a sense of disempowerment, detrimental impact on organizational image, alignment with societal norms, influence of collective culture, and historical influence.

Perceived Pressure to Conform

All novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and two near-end career teachers emphasized the pressure to adhere to the “Kiss up, kick down” culture. They described it as an implicit rule in their workplace. One novice teacher stated, “It seems as if you have to play by these rules to survive in this field. The pressure is palpable, especially for newcomers like us.” The prevalence of this sentiment across all career stages points to the ubiquity and persistence of this culture.

Conflict Between Personal Values and Professional Survival

This conflict was particularly prominent among mid-career teachers. Balancing personal beliefs with the demands of the prevailing culture posed significant challenges. A mid-career teacher shared, “Balancing between adhering to my principles and navigating the hierarchical dynamics is challenging. The tug of war is constant.”

Impact on Trust and Organizational Culture

All near-end career teachers, along with some mid-career and novice teachers, highlighted the deleterious effects of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture on trust and overall

organizational culture. A near-end career teacher said, “Over the years, I have seen how this culture erodes trust and harmony in our institution. It is a systemic issue that needs to be addressed.”

Impact on Professional Growth and Development

The majority of participants across all career stages mentioned the detrimental effect of the prevailing culture on professional growth and development. An excerpt from a near-end career teacher’s interview was particularly poignant: “This culture hinders talent nurturing. It favors compliance over competence, which is detrimental in the long run.”

Effect on Mental Well-being

The culture’s impact on mental well-being was a common concern. A novice teacher reflected, “The constant pressure and the need to please superiors take a toll on my mental health.” These sentiments were echoed by other participants, with the struggle being particularly acute among novice teachers.

Desire for Change

All participants expressed a wish for a change in the culture, a sentiment most strongly voiced by the near-end career teachers. One of them said, “Change is overdue. The culture needs a complete overhaul for a healthier academic atmosphere.”

Ingrained Cultural Practices

A significant number of participants across all career stages recognized the “Kiss up, kick down” culture as a deep-seated practice within their institutions. As a near-end career teacher observed, “From my experience, this culture has remained entrenched for decades. It is almost a part of the institution’s identity now.” This theme highlights the deeply rooted nature of this culture and the challenges associated with change.

Power Dynamics and Hierarchy

All mid-career teachers, along with a significant number of novice and near-end career teachers, highlighted the importance of power dynamics and hierarchical structures in sustaining the “Kiss up, kick down” culture. A near-end career teacher noted, “The culture is fueled by power and hierarchy. It creates a divide between those at different levels.”

Impact on Interpersonal Relationships

All career stages identified the negative impact of this culture on interpersonal relationships. A mid-career teacher shared, “Maintaining healthy professional relationships becomes difficult in such an environment. There is always an underlying tension.”

Diminished Job Satisfaction

The culture was identified by all novice teachers and many mid-career and near-end career teachers as a significant factor contributing to decreased job satisfaction. A mid-career teacher lamented, “Years of observing and occasionally participating in this culture have significantly lowered my job satisfaction.”

Sense of Disempowerment

The prevailing culture left many participants, particularly mid-career teachers, feeling disempowered. A novice teacher shared, “I feel like I do not have the power to change anything. It’s discouraging.”

Detrimental Impact on Organizational Image

Many teachers across all career stages mentioned the potential harm that the culture could pose to their institution’s reputation. A near-end career teacher expressed concern that, “In the long run, this culture could severely damage our institution’s standing and attractiveness to prospective faculty and students.”

Alignment with Societal Norms

Participants noted that the culture mirrored societal norms in Vietnam, especially those related to respect for hierarchy and authority. A near-end career teacher commented, “Our society respects hierarchy, and it has naturally seeped into our institutions. Changing this will be challenging.”

Influence of Collective Culture

The influence of Vietnam’s collective culture was seen as a factor contributing to the persistence of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture. A near-end career teacher observed, “Our collective culture makes it hard for individuals to challenge the status quo, even when it is harmful. This reinforces the ‘Kiss up, kick down’ culture.”

Historical Influence

The influence of Vietnam’s historical background, including the legacy of Confucianism and its emphasis on respect for authority, was seen by some participants, especially near-end career teachers, as a contributing factor to the persistence of this culture. As a near-end career teacher noted, “Vietnam’s history has shaped its present, including this culture. Breaking free from it requires acknowledging and addressing these historical roots.”

Discussion

The findings of the present study contribute to the growing body of literature on workplace culture, specifically the “Kiss up, kick down” phenomenon. They echo previous studies that have indicated the negative effects of such a culture on job satisfaction (Laguda, 2021), mental well-being (Cinar & Bilodeau., 2022), and professional growth (Jeong, 2014). However, this study extends these findings by exploring these effects in-depth across different career stages in the Vietnamese tertiary teaching context. The reduction in job satisfaction parallels findings by Hochwarter et al. (2010). However, the results provide a unique insight into how this culture’s effect on job satisfaction evolves across career stages, with novice teachers being the most affected. This could potentially be linked to their recent exposure to the culture and the disconnect they may feel between their ideals and the existing practices. Themes such as the impact on professional growth and development, mental well-being, and the desire for change correspond with the work of Tepper et al. (2006) and Brees et al. (2013), underlining the universal relevance of these implications. Nevertheless, the unanimous call for change from the near-end career teachers in our study is particularly noteworthy, suggesting that the cumulative effects of this culture over time might catalyze a desire for systemic change.

The sense of disempowerment and the detrimental impact on the organizational image are novel findings that underscore the broader implications of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture beyond individual impacts. These findings highlight the potential risks this culture poses to organizational health and reputation, warranting urgent attention and action from institutional leadership. Exploring the “Kiss up, kick down” culture within the Vietnamese context revealed interesting themes. The alignment with societal norms, the influence of collective culture, and the historical influence provide a nuanced understanding of this culture’s pervasiveness in Vietnam. These themes reflect the complex interplay between cultural values, societal norms,

historical influences, and workplace practices, echoing cultural dimensions theory (van Prooijen & Song, 2021). The perceived alignment of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture with societal norms and collective culture in Vietnam might explain the culture’s persistence, reflecting the society’s high power distance and collectivism (Nguyen et al., 2021; Quynh, 2021). Similarly, the noted historical influence of Confucianism aligns with previous research highlighting the enduring effects of historical cultural systems on contemporary organizational practices (McHale, 2008). In summary, our study offers a nuanced understanding of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture in the Vietnamese tertiary teaching context. While the findings resonate with previous research on the negative effects of this culture, they also shed light on additional, context-specific implications. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive strategies to address this culture, taking into account the unique societal, cultural, and historical factors at play.

CONCLUSION

The present study embarked on a critical exploration of the “Kiss up, kick down” office culture, specifically in the context of Vietnam’s tertiary education sector. The journey into the nuances of this pervasive culture yielded a deeper understanding of its varied implications across different career stages, enriching the existing body of literature with culturally and contextually specific insights. The findings not only confirmed the negative impact of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture, as hypothesized in the introduction, but they also revealed previously overlooked consequences of this culture. This culture was found to lower job satisfaction, induce a sense of disempowerment, and potentially harm the institutional image. In particular, the study highlighted the potent influence of societal norms, collective culture, and historical forces in perpetuating this culture within the Vietnamese context.

The study’s impact lies in its potential to inform culturally sensitive interventions to address this harmful culture. It underscores the importance of incorporating a deep understanding of cultural, societal, and historical contexts into the design and implementation of interventions, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness. Looking forward, the findings lay a strong foundation for further exploration of the “Kiss up, kick down” culture in other cultural and professional contexts. They also call for a deeper examination of the potential mechanisms through which societal norms and historical forces shape workplace cultures. It is suggested that future research to investigate effective strategies to combat this culture, with a particular emphasis on strategies that have been successful in similar cultural contexts. Additionally, research could explore the experiences and perspectives of other stakeholders within the tertiary education sector, such as administrative staff and students, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. Through ongoing research efforts, it is expected to pave the way towards healthier, more equitable, and more empowering workplace cultures in Vietnam and beyond.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study. The research was conducted independently and with full transparency, without any financial, professional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the outcomes of the research.

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