

# Effects of Tall Poppy Syndrome on Work Performance: A Multivariate Regression Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS), a social attitude in which high achievers are resented by their peers in the workplace, on work performance indicators within a Philippine higher education institution. Using a multivariate regression analysis on data from 204 faculty and staff members, the study examined the effects of perceived tall poppy syndrome on decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality. Contrary to expectations, TPS did not negatively affect decision-making, problem-solving, or internal service quality significantly. Significantly, the study found a strong positive relationship between TPS and creativity in that unique academic environment; thus, it may function as an ambiguous propellant for creative output. Furthermore, education level did not moderate the relationship between TPS and work performance indicators. Hence, such findings contradict the universal negative conception of TPS and illustrate how institutional culture may have a role in it. The research demonstrated that within certain academic conditions, there might be more subtle effects of TPS that would nurture creativity while not having a significant effect on other dimensions of work performance. The implications call for context-specific approaches to understanding and managing the effect of social dynamics like TPS in the workplace in the Philippines.

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## Introduction

Think of a field of poppies, where any flower that grows higher than the others is cut down to restore uniformity (Billan, 2019). This refers to metaphorically- Tall Poppy Syndrome. It is a social attitude that individuals resent, criticize, socially exclude, or fall in favor of those high-achievers in their workplace (Cross et al., 2024). As a result, success triggers backlash, suppresses creativity, hinders decision-making and problem-solving, and weakens individual and organizational internal quality (Dediu, 2015).

The roots of TPS trace back to ancient times. According to Roman historian Titus Livius Patavinus, King Lucius Tarquinius Superbus symbolically cut off the heads of the tallest poppies in his garden—an act representing the removal of potential political threats in his era dated 500 B.C. (Tapper, 2014). Today, TPS is most notably observed in countries like Australia and New Zealand, where cultural norms sometimes discourage individual distinction in favor of collective modesty (Mouly et al., 2002; Mackay, 2018). However, this mindset, often seen as a cultural norm, can act like a workplace "disease"—penalizing excellence and enforcing conformity by cutting down those who rise above (Peeters, 2004). Thus, TPS reflects how colleagues perceive and react to others' success, often negatively (Dedi, 2015).

Similarly, 87.3% of Canadian professionals in Billan's (2019) study believed their colleagues or supervisors often undermined others' success. This problem appears to be incredibly widespread in white-collar and knowledge-based sectors, where recognition of effort and opportunities for promotion are significant. In these industries, particularly education, achievement is valued but is usually accompanied by undercurrents of competition that can make standout individuals more susceptible to TPS.

While most studies highlight TPS in Western settings, the phenomenon is not geographically confined. It emerges across various cultures, regardless of whether they celebrate or suppress individual achievements. It all started with the discoveries of Feather et al. (1991), who found that high achievers with humble attitudes are more positively accepted than those perceived as arrogant, highlighting how cultural values shape responses to success. Even in collectivist societies that value group harmony, TPS can thrive, further suppressing individual potential (Shulruf et al., 2007). As such, TPS poses a global challenge to workplace culture, especially as organizations seek to foster innovation and growth.

In Southeast Asia, particularly the Philippines, TPS often mirrors the "crab mentality" concept—a tendency to drag down those who rise above others (Billote et al., 2021). Ninety percent of Filipino workers experience TPS, which translates into poor work performance because it is rooted in survival instinct and social pressure, where creativity is retaliated, making them reluctant to share it within their profession, ultimately jeopardizing workplace sustainability (Sucgang, 2023).

As stated by Dedi (2015), the negative perception by colleagues toward someone has a highly detrimental effect on work performance—resulting in poor decision-making, inhibited creativity, and low problem-solving abilities. These factors are critical to service-oriented environments like education, where collaboration, innovation, and internal service quality are essential for success. To support the argument, Pepper and Giles (2015) revealed that high-achieving teachers at the University of Melbourne sometimes felt resentment and exclusion from their colleagues because of these competitive environments. Also, in the report of The Guardian (2017), some instances of "academic sabotage" were recorded: successful researchers suffered isolation, resulting in low research productivity. These realities prompt key research questions in this study: 1. Does Tall Poppy Syndrome exist? 2. How does it affect work performance indicators, including decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality?

Guided by Human Capital Theory and Strategic Human Resource Theory, the study explored whether employees who perceived their colleagues as having negative attitudes towards 'tall poppies' – those favoring their 'fall' rather than their reward – would experience negative effects on their work performance, including decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality. Also, it investigates whether educational level moderates these effects. The study will focus on the Systems Plus College Foundation (SPCF). This private higher education institution, located in Angeles City, Pampanga, has upheld core values such as service, professionalism, competence, and fellowship for almost three decades. SPCF supports employee growth through a culture of continuous learning and strives to balance academic excellence with employee engagement (Systems Plus College Foundation, n.d.). It is interesting to explore whether such a workplace environment can allow TPS to emerge and negatively affect work performance.

The study provides important insights into a broader issue that has largely gone unexamined in the Philippines, though it is limited to only one institution. Although it might not represent all sectors or regions, it adds meaning to the literature and provides a basis for future studies. Dealing with TPS is crucial to creating a culture where ambition is a reason to be rewarded — not something to punish — so all tall poppies can bloom without fear of being cut down.

## Literature Review

### Human Capital Theory and Strategic Human Resource Theory

People are the engine that drives the development of an organization with knowledge, skills, and abilities (Jackson et al., 1995). As Becker (1964) and Mincer (1958) proved, investment in education and the development of the workforce certainly pays businesses back many times over with high performance of their employees. The theory explains present talent management, whereby organizations are committed to training, enhancement of skills, and leadership workshops toward competitive advantage. The theory gives credence to the idea that employees will always give their best—a premise that seldom stands up against the realities of the workplace.

One significant challenge is the presence of the TPS—a social phenomenon where high achievers face resentment or negative social consequences (Feather, 1989). Tapper (2014) identified that many top-performing employees intentionally underperform so as not to stand out and invite workplace hostility. Similarly, Kirkwood (2007) noted that among New Zealand entrepreneurs, 50% intentionally limit their businesses from growing fast enough to attract unwanted attention. The results thus suggest that even in organizations where heavy investment in employee development would be made, TPS limitations and outcomes prevent employees from exposing their full potential.

Individual employees are not the sole victims of TPS—such problems can trigger a slow death for entire organizations. According to some research, work performance is seriously affected, with 75 percent of all employees having their productivity impacted by TPS-related pressures (Bulcock, 2023; Billan, 2023). It can be seen that many have remained aloof from celebrating yet indulged in some notable accomplishments; this was born out of the fear of criticism by peers at work. Thus, the typical social and personal barriers that TPS creates are insidious. Due to such hindrances, organizations would do well to address human resource management in a manner that creates an environment of feeling valued and supported, where orchestras thrive.

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) offers a solution by aligning HR practices with organizational goals (Jackson et al., 1995; Bennett et al., 2007). Pfeffer (1998) stated that success should be contingent on applying high-performance work systems like selective hiring, training, and performance incentives. These systems should be aimed at inducing incentives for excellence and driving productivity. However, the same paradox is visible in TPS: Formal HR policies reward high performance; on the other hand, informal workplace norms punish those who dare to excel. Recent studies suggest that workplaces fostering a TPS culture experience declines in decision-making confidence, avoidance of responsibility, stifled creativity, and reduced internal service quality (Dedi, 2015).

Also, Dedi (2015) emphasizes the ailment of team collaboration and overall service quality due to TPS, which again shows that the spoils go beyond the individual dry and into the open organizational environment. If companies reward excellence through HR policies but simultaneously cultivate an environment where high achievers are penalized, employees may disengage from innovation, leadership, and risk-taking behaviors. Consequently, the author suggested that TPS negatively affects key performance indicators, including decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality. While TPS may not be equally dominant across

all industries, its presence in workplaces emphasizing collectivism over individual achievement suggests that it is a widespread issue requiring strategic intervention.

Human Capital Theory lays the foundation for investing in people, and SHRM provides the strategies to make it happen. Unless organizations recognize and handle TPS with cutting-edge HR strategies, they will never be able to capitalize on human resources. These strategies encourage a supportive culture, appreciation of effort, and psychological safety. It would, therefore, appear that TPS directly contradicts these environments by discouraging high performance. By balancing formal incentives with a positive workplace environment, organizations can ensure employees feel motivated to excel without worrying about social backlash.

## **Tall Poppy Syndrome in the Workplace**

Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) is a well-documented phenomenon in the education sector, affecting students, faculty, and staff across various cultural contexts. Originating from the metaphor of cutting down the tallest poppy, TPS is operationally defined as how employees perceive negative attitudes toward successful colleagues, measured by the Tall Poppy Attitude Scale (Feather, 1989; Dediu, 2015). This syndrome has been observed across various cultural contexts, suggesting it is a global issue rather than a culture-specific one (Pepper & Giles, 2015; The Guardian, 2017).

The effect of TPS is severe. When someone feels judged or hated for their success, they might avoid decisions and not seek help or withhold ideas. Empirical evidence shows that those who experience very strong negativity from coworkers often become timid in their choices and refrain from taking actions because they are scared of being criticized (Dediu, 2015). This fear may even affect their confidence in solving problems, resulting in self-doubts or avoidance of challenges altogether (Billan, 2019). In schools and universities, this may inhibit teachers and staff from participating in the sharing of solutions—they may go underground and escape such a label.

One of the adverse effects of TPS is how it stifles creativity. For example, in Malaysian universities, high-achieving professors often face gossip and exclusion, discouraging open discussions and leading to lower research productivity (Tan, 2019). In Australia, some teachers say they avoid mentorship or leadership roles because they do not want to be seen as showing off (Pepper & Giles, 2015). This creates an environment of fear, where people feel pressured to hide their creative ideas instead of using them to help others. When success becomes something, people are punished for, innovation suffers, and progress slows down.

The adverse does not stop there. Employees in high-TPS environments tend to provide lower internal service quality, becoming less helpful and courteous toward colleagues (Dediu, 2015). Studies link it to increased stress, burnout, and attrition among educators and staff. Workplace hostility—such as exclusion, credit theft, and bureaucratic retaliation—further deteriorates internal service quality and institutional performance. For instance, Indonesian academics have faced deliberate administrative delays as punishment for their achievements (The Guardian, 2017), while star researchers in Philippine universities report passive-aggressive resentment and social exclusion, leading many to leave their institutions (Tan, 2019). These findings highlight how institutional cultures that tacitly tolerate TPS contribute to brain drain and a decline in academic excellence.

These findings show that TPS is more than just a social issue—it threatens growth and excellence in education and beyond. It penalizes ambition and rewards mediocrity because being average is better than standing out. Competition, many may argue, is natural; the world is governed by the survival of the fittest, right? However, TPS goes too far when achievement is used as a rationale for punishment. To combat this, institutions need to foster cultures that incentivize achievement rather than penalize it. If this is not tackled, its long-term consequences will perpetuate the slow death of education system across the world – no innovation, low morale, and perpetual inertia will be the defining characteristics of education sector.

## Work Performance Indicators

Work performance implies not just the completion of tasks but extends to the discretionary behaviors that contribute to the overall effectiveness of the workplace. According to Campbell (1990), work performance is an observable behavior people display in their jobs regarding the organization's ends. Likewise, Motowidlo et al. (2003) state that job performance extends beyond completing assigned tasks and discretionary working behaviors that enhance workplace functioning. This is in line with the point of view mentioned before, which indicated that work performance is more than task accomplishment but all other contributions towards the improvement of effectiveness in the organization.

Completing tasks would not be the only job performance metric; organizations value decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality (Deming, 2021; Griffin et al., 2007; Dediu, 2015). Research, however, supports that these discretionary behaviors are critical to a productive and lively work environment. Evidence shows that employees realize the value of going the extra mile in their jobs, nurturing a positive organizational culture, creating cohesion within teams, and ensuring future conservation within organizations (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2005). This study, which incorporates the Dediu framework (2015), examines the negative impact of TPS on key work performance indicators such as decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality.

### Decision-making

The decision-making process is highly vulnerable to adverse outcomes of TPS, as noted by Dediu (2015). In the workplace, discouraging attitudes toward high achievers can negatively impede the vigilance and dependability of decision-making and can, conversely, promote avoidant behavioral tendencies. Empirical evidence supports this: the results indicate that employees in environments discouraging highly-achieving behaviors are less reliable in making decisions and more inclined to avoid those decisions (Deming, 2021; Chen et al., 2015; Neill et al., 2024). This phenomenon is likely caused by increased fear of being scrutinized in case of errant progressions. In a highly transactional, TPS-style environment, workers regard high performance as a social threat, so they choose low-risk options if they do make a choice (Dediu, 2015). We, therefore, hypothesize:

*H1: Tall Poppy Syndrome significantly negatively affects decision-making.*

### Problem-solving

Employees who think creating original solutions contributes to social justice often refrain from presenting their best solutions or purposely avoid innovating problem-solving methods. Dediu (2015) hypothesized that fostering a negative attitude toward high- and overachievers in an organization could undermine their problem-solving capacity. This suggests that TPS discourages employees from fully engaging their cognitive resources in developing novel solutions. As Kim et al. (2014) pointed out, problem-solving can only be productive through collaboration: building on other people's ideas is always effective. On the contrary, workplaces where one-responder feels sick contributions are bitter and not consumed by appreciation lead to employees hesitating to share their thoughts (Billan, 2019). Further research states that workplace-generated envy hampered team communication and information sharing, worsening collaborative problem-solving (Li et al., 2021; Wikes, 2023). Hence, we hypothesize that:

*H2: Tall Poppy Syndrome significantly negatively affects problem-solving.*

## Creativity

Creativity deals with the uniqueness, risk taking, or challenging idea which is considered negative behavior in TPS environments (Yang et al., 2021). Dediu (2015) proposed that negative attitudes towards high achievers in the workplace dampens creativity. Employees who feel that their creative achievements may lead to resentment or criticism may consciously or unconsciously hold back their creative impulses (Breidenthal et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). This self-censorship restricts the flow of innovative ideas within the organization, ultimately hindering its ability to evolve and adapt. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

*H3: Tall Poppy Syndrome significantly negatively affects creativity.*

## Internal Service Quality

Internal service quality is one of work performance's most important driving forces. However, the TPS often skews the implementation of such names, so employees might reduce their effort, feeling that if they excel in their work, it creates unnecessary scrutiny. They would only work to an adequate level of service delivery (Dediu, 2015). It becomes a more serious threat to service-oriented organizations, where A-quality service becomes an ongoing and serious competitive advantage. Studies show that TPS can lead high achievers to lose motivation, often resulting in lower-quality internal services and weaker customer relationships (Neill et al., 2024). It signifies that employees are even demoralized, and the outward customer delivery of the organization worsens. In addition, under the TPS, the incidence of workplace bullying and discrimination is said to multiply, which leaves an even more toxic environment for work (Marques, 2023). This would further demotivate and discourage employees from providing better service. This would further demotivate and discourage employees from providing better service. Thus, the below hypothesis is drawn:

*H4: Tall Poppy Syndrome significantly negatively affects internal service quality.*

It is critical to understand how Tall Poppy Syndrome harms one's work so that one can cultivate a healthy and productive environment. Organizations may act by understanding how TPS affects decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality. Subsequently, they will develop approaches to mitigating the effects of TPS damages. A culture that can promote or value high achievers will thus lessen the challenges caused by this tendency and result in better overall performance for the organization.

## Educational Level as Moderator

According to Williams and Foti (2011), certain collective formations might influence how certain persons experience TPS compared to others. Regarding education and TPS, for instance, it could be noted that higher-educated individuals are more prone to fall victim to TPS than those who are less educated, as their higher achievements make them excel and, hence, become tall poppies. However, those tall poppies who are high-achievers are such due to their credentials that further legitimize their successes and mitigate the adverse effects of such treatment.

Such insights show that education level determines how TPS might affect performance in the workplace. Research may be scarce on direct links between educational level and Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS); one possible approach to interpreting this would be to view it in terms of Human Capital Theory, where education is regarded as the essential form of human capital. Thus, a higher level of education may increase one's visibility at work and make one more prone to experiencing TPS. According to Human Capital Theory, investing in education increases an individual's value and prominence in professional environments (Becker, 1993). Therefore, highly educated individuals would attract more attention and face more significant social penalties for their success in decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality, as noted by Dediu (2015).

Fortunately, such heightening visibility is also a protective factor from TPS. Educational requirements legitimize one's achievements and offer some protection against potential backlash (Williams et al., 2011). With their intellectual and professional achievements, highly educated individuals can insulate themselves from the social penalties associated with TPS, so to speak, from the most detrimental effects.

While education level acts as a shield at work, it further increases an individual's vulnerability to TPS. Such person tends to resonate their identity with their intellect or professional achievements and, therefore, be less shielded. In such cases, the relationship could be strengthened for a host of reasons: higher education, most of the time, is associated with people who dedicate themselves more to work and have a higher tendency to be sensitive to criticism (Williams & Foti, 2011). This warrants the justification of educational level as an important moderator of TPS and how it manifests. Given that, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H5: Educational level moderates the negative effects of Tall Poppy Syndrome on (a) decision-making, (b) problem-solving, (c) creativity, and (d) internal service quality.*

Based on the research hypotheses developed, we established the research framework for the present study. Figure 1 presents the hypothesized relationships in the study: the significant negative effects of TPS on key work performance indicators, including decision-making (H1), problem-solving (H2), creativity (H3), and internal service quality (H4). Additionally, it examines whether educational level (H5) moderates these effects. The proposed research framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

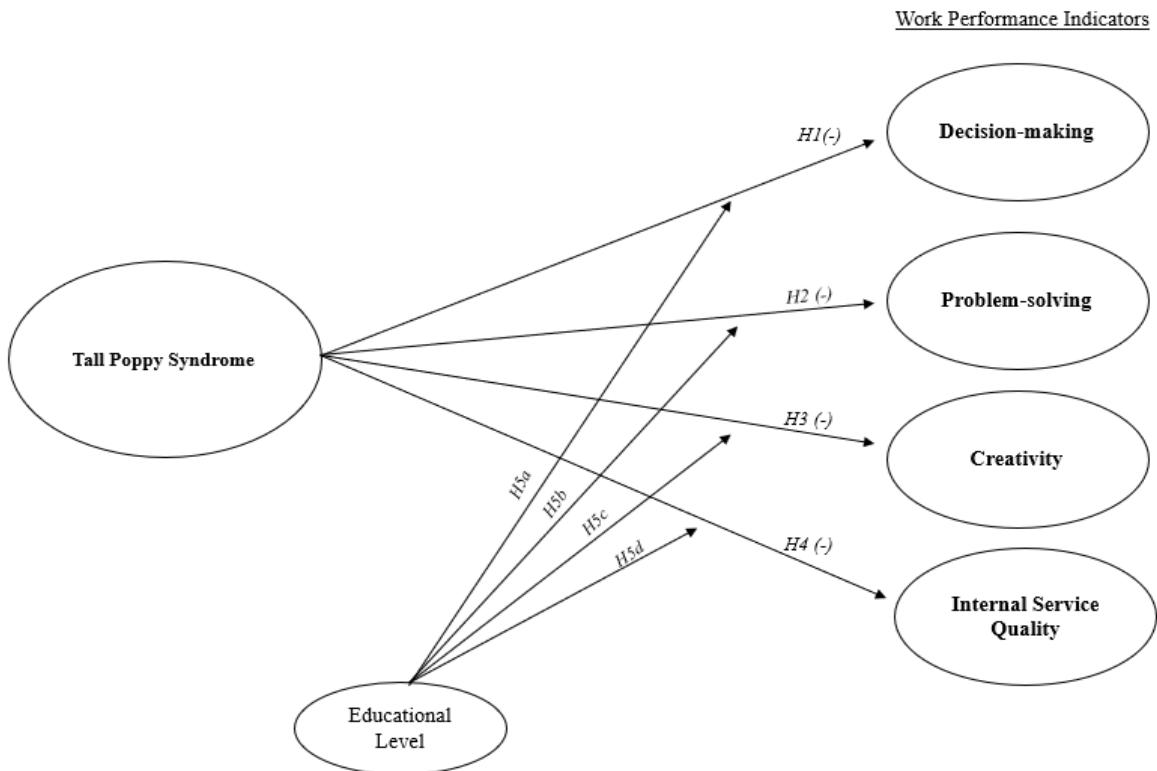


Figure 1. Conceptual model

# Methodology

## Research Design

This study applied the predictive-causal research design, with multivariate regression analysis as the principal statistical technique. The design is, therefore, justifiable, as it assumes that the independent variable affects the multiple dependent variables simultaneously while controlling other moderating factors (Stockemer et al., 2019; Mardia et al., 2024). IBM SPSS was used to analyze the data.

## Population and Sample Size

The participants comprised 204 respondents, 112 full-time college faculty members, and 92 staff members. The stratified random sampling technique was adopted to proportionally represent full-time college faculty and staff in academic and non-academic units. This method enhances generalizability by maintaining a balanced distribution across the subgroups (Etikan et al., 2017). The stratified random sampling technique is proper in educational and organizational research because it enhances precision and minimizes sampling error compared to the simple random sampling method (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Tall Poppy Syndrome and work performance are examples of workplace dynamics, and using a broader sample of faculty and staff ensures that perspectives from diverse roles are present, thereby validating the study (Podsakoff et al., 2012). With 204 participants, the study was well within any minimum sample size considerations necessary for performing statistical analysis and validating the findings (Saunders et al., 2003).

Data collection took place over one week to gather responses from the selected full-time faculty and Systems Plus College Foundation staff. The collected data were then reviewed and tallied for analysis, which took another week. The data gathering, encoding, analysis, interpretation, and whole report writing processes were completed within three weeks (from February 27, 2025, to March 30, 2025).

## Research Instrument

An adapted survey questionnaire was carefully refined and used as the primary tool for collecting relevant participant data. Due to institutional data privacy policies, this study did not assess actual performance evaluations. Instead, work performance was operationalized through self-reported dimensions of performance (e.g., perceived decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality), which are supported by Dediu (2015).

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section gathered demographic information about full-time college faculty and staff, precisely their educational level. Although the study focused primarily on educational level as the key demographic variable, other characteristics such as age, gender, tenure, and departmental affiliation were not collected. As a result, while the sample is proportionally representative in terms of faculty and staff distribution, the absence of broader demographic information limits the ability to assess potential sample biases or determine the full representativeness of the respondents. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings, particularly concerning their generalizability across different demographic groups.

The second section encompassed the five key constructs: the Tall Poppy Scale (Feather, 1989), the Decision-Making Scale (Leykin et al., 2010), the Problem-Solving Scale (Heppner et al., 1979), the Creativity Scale (Zhou et al., 2001), and the Internal Service Quality Scale (Boshoff et al., 1995). Participants were categorized based on the highest level of education they had completed to measure their educational level, using frameworks such as the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). This allows for comparisons of educational attainment, distinguishing between "less educated" and "higher educated"

individuals. For example, a person with a master's degree would be considered more highly educated than someone with a bachelor's degree.

A four-point Likert scale was used to measure each variable, where (1) represented "strongly disagree" and (4) represented "strongly agree." For the Tall Poppy Scale, a higher score on the total attitude scale operationally signifies a stronger perception among employees that their colleagues exhibit Tall Poppy Syndrome—favoring the "fall" of successful individuals and holding negative attitudes toward them. Conversely, a lower score reflects the perception that colleagues hold more positive attitudes toward successful individuals and support their success.

In the decision-making scale, a higher score on the perceived decision-making scale indicates a stronger belief in one's ability to make effective decisions and greater confidence in decision-making skills. On the problem-solving scale, a high score indicates that an individual feels confident and strong about their problem-solving because it is related to inherently having an attitude of security when approaching problems. In the creativity scale, a higher score reflects a belief in one's creative potential, including the ability to think creatively and see oneself as a creative individual. Finally, a higher score in perceived internal service quality suggests that employees are knowledgeable about the institution and its programs and services, perform tasks correctly, dress professionally and maintain a neat appearance, meet deadlines, treat all faculty and staff courteously, and act in the best interests of the organization.

The adapted questionnaire was piloted and tested for reliability using Cronbach's alpha. The reported coefficients for each scale met the minimum threshold of 0.7, confirming the reliability of the individual scales and the overall instrument.

## **Ethical Consideration**

Participants were informed about the purpose and significance of the study through a consent letter included in the printed survey form. Completing the survey required less than five minutes, and participation posed no foreseeable risks or offered monetary compensation. Participants had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, even after beginning the survey. All data collected were treated with strict confidentiality. The results do not hold the administrators or the institutions with which participants are affiliated accountable and will not affect participants' relationships with these entities in any way. The information gathered is intended solely for the purposes of this study, its publication, or subsequent secondary data analyses.

## **Results and Discussion**

The current research used Multivariate Regression Analysis to investigate how Tall Poppy Syndrome significantly negatively affects work performance indicators—decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality—while being moderated by educational level.

The faculty and staff's educational backgrounds, categorized by Bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Compared to those with higher degrees, most participants (64.7%) have a Bachelor's degree, making it the most common level of education in the sample and classifying them as "less educated." Most (29.9%) are "higher educated," having earned a Master's degree, and only 5.4% have earned a Doctorate, the highest and most prestigious degree. This distribution reflects typical trends where higher qualifications are less common.

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics reflecting the reliability and distribution of responses of the five constructs: Tall Poppy Syndrome, Decision-Making, Problem-Solving, Creativity, and Internal Service Quality. Both Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) showed strong internal consistency (all greater than 0.79). This means the constructs are reliable measures for the variables under investigation or study.

The rule of thumb for reliability is that constructs' CR and CA coefficients should score not less than 0.7 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Kock, 2014; Kock & Lynn, 2012).

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics that provide insights into how five important constructs are perceived among employees. Tall Poppy Syndrome - a mean rating of 2.45 suggests that employees generally do not perceive a strong presence of it in their workplace. That is to say, they tend to believe that their colleagues hold positive attitudes toward high-achievers and that they are supportive, not resentful of others' success.

On the other hand, the decision-making scale shows a mean rating of 3.54, followed by problem-solving, with an average mean of 3.48. Such high ratings indicate that employees have strong trust in their decision-making capabilities and confidence in their problem-solving skills, reflecting overall confidence and psychological safety in their ability to handle work-related issues independently.

Creativity, as measured by the scale, had a mean rating of 3.28, which denotes that employees perceive themselves to be creative thinkers, or at least capable of becoming such. This score is lower than those for decision-making and problem solutions, yet it provides indication of a generally positive self-assessment. Likewise, the mean of internal service quality scale was still high (3.41) and thus reflects the employees' perception of themselves and their colleagues being professional, courteous, knowledgeable, and working toward organizational goals.

The overall findings indicate a healthy and psychologically empowered workforce. Employees demonstrate a strong belief in their abilities to make decisions and solve problems; they remain positively inclined towards their creative potential and keep high standards for internal service. Further, the perceived incidence of the Tall Poppy Syndrome is low, indicating a nurturing organizational culture that supports success rather than discourages it.

*Table 1. Summary of Descriptive Statistics*

| Constructs               | CA   | CR   | Mean | Std. Dev | 95% Confidence Level<br>Lower   Upper |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|----------|---------------------------------------|
| Tall Poppy Syndrome      | .793 | .796 | 2.45 | .668     | 2.39 - 2.59                           |
| Decision-Making          | .890 | .890 | 3.54 | .528     | 3.47 – 3.62                           |
| Problem-Solving          | .848 | .855 | 3.48 | .511     | 3.41 – 3.55                           |
| Creativity               | .888 | .892 | 3.28 | .461     | 3.22 – 3.33                           |
| Internal Service Quality | .863 | .865 | 3.41 | .540     | 3.33 – 3.48                           |

Table 2 presents the assumption checks that ensure the data meet the necessary conditions for statistical analysis. Box's M test for homogeneity of covariance resulted in  $M = 23.55$ ,  $F = 1.068$ ,  $p = .377$ , indicating that the assumption is met, as the p-value exceeds the .05 threshold. Similarly, Levene's test for homogeneity of variance confirms that the assumption holds for all constructs: Decision-Making ( $F = 1.365$ ,  $p = .258$ ), Problem-Solving ( $F = .221$ ,  $p = .802$ ), Creativity ( $F = 1.547$ ,  $p = .215$ ), and Internal Service Quality ( $F = 1.990$ ,  $p = .301$ ). Since all p-values are greater than .05, the data do not violate the homogeneity of variance assumption.

Moreover, it confirms adequate multicollinearity measurement using a correlation matrix since all correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) are below .9. There are no excessive correlations in variables that show enough constructs to be theoretically considered distinct so as not to yield overlap in the analysis. In summary, assumption checks show that the data in the dataset satisfy the necessary statistical assumptions, thereby justifying the results obtained.

Table 2. Assumption Checks

|                                  | Test Used          | Statistic                  | p    | Decision           |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|------|--------------------|
| <b>Homogeneity of Covariance</b> | Box's M Test       | $M = 23.55$<br>$F = 1.068$ | .377 | Assumption met     |
| <b>Homogeneity of Variance</b>   |                    |                            |      |                    |
| DM                               | Levene's Test      | $F = 1.365$                | .258 | Assumption met     |
| PS                               |                    | $F = .221$                 | .802 | Assumption met     |
| Creativity                       |                    | $F = 1.547$                | .215 | Assumption met     |
| Internal Service Quality         |                    | $F = 1.990$                | .301 | Assumption met     |
| <b>Multicollinearity</b>         | Correlation Matrix | All $r < .9$               | -    | No issues detected |

\*p - significant  $<.05$

## Testing of Hypotheses

The multivariate regression analysis, shown in Table 3, examines the effect of Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) on various work performance indicators: Decision-Making (DM), Problem-Solving (PS), Creativity (CR), and Internal Service Quality (ISQ).

For Hypothesis 1 (H1), the regression coefficient ( $\beta = -0.075$ ) is small, and the result is not statistically significant ( $F = 0.035$ ,  $p = 0.851$ ). The partial eta-squared ( $\eta^2 = 0.095$ ) also suggests a weak effect. This means that employees' perception of TPS does not have a meaningful impact on their decision-making abilities, and thus, the hypothesis is not supported.

In Hypothesis 2 (H2), the result ( $\beta = 0.033$ ,  $F = 0.529$ ,  $p = 0.468$ ) was also not statistically significant, with a weak effect size ( $\eta^2 = 0.098$ ). This indicates that perceptions of TPS do not significantly influence employees' confidence or capability in solving problems, and again, the hypothesis is not supported.

Interestingly, Hypothesis 3 (H3) tested whether TPS negatively affects creativity. Contrary to expectations, the results showed a significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.091$ ,  $F = 6.881$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ) with a moderate effect size ( $\eta^2 = 0.145$ ). This means higher perceptions of Tall Poppy Syndrome are associated with higher self-reported creativity levels. In other words, employees who perceive more TPS in their environment may be more likely to see themselves as creative, possibly as a form of personal resilience or differentiation. Although this supports the hypothesis regarding statistical significance, the direction of the relationship is the reverse of what was predicted, leading to a supported (reverse effect) conclusion.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 (H4) tested whether TPS negatively impacts internal service quality. The results ( $\beta = 0.119$ ,  $F = 3.614$ ,  $p = 0.059$ ) are not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, though the p-value is marginal. The effect size ( $\eta^2 = 0.025$ ) is small, and so the hypothesis is not supported. This suggests that perceptions of TPS do not meaningfully affect how employees perceive or deliver internal service quality.

One notable result that emerged from the main effects is that TPS significantly predicted lower creativity. This finding underscores the selective and multidimensional impact of TPS in organizations. Creativity involves risk-taking, confidence, and a sense of psychological safety—conditions that are likely compromised when individuals perceive themselves as targets of resentment or tall poppy behavior. Because creativity relies heavily on psychological safety, autonomy, and confidence, it is especially vulnerable to the effects of TPS. Unlike routine or structured tasks such as decision-making or internal service quality, creativity is highly sensitive to interpersonal dynamics and emotional climate. Thus, even in the absence of moderation by education, TPS appears to inhibit the higher-order, discretionary, and innovation-focused behaviors that organizations depend on for adaptability and long-term competitiveness.

Table 3. Multivariate Regression Test of Tall Poppy Syndrome on Work Performance Indicators

|                              | $\beta$ | F     | p    | Partial $\eta^2$ | Interpretation              | Decision                   |
|------------------------------|---------|-------|------|------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>H1. TPS -&gt; (-) DM</b>  | -.075   | .035  | .851 | .095             | Not significant             | Not supported              |
| <b>H2. TPS -&gt; (-) PS</b>  | .033    | .529  | .468 | .098             | Not significant             | Not supported              |
| <b>H3. TPS -&gt; (-) CR</b>  | .091    | 6.881 | .009 | .145             | Significant Positive Effect | Supported (reverse effect) |
| <b>H4. TPS -&gt; (-) ISQ</b> | .119    | 3.614 | .059 | .025             | Not significant             | Not Supported              |

TPS=tall poppy syndrome; DM=decision-making; PS=problem-solving; CR=creativity; ISQ – internal service quality

Table 4 presents the moderating effect of educational level on the relationship between Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) and work performance indicators. The results indicate that educational level does not significantly moderate any of these relationships. For Hypothesis 5a, which tested whether educational level moderates the relationship between TPS and decision-making, the results revealed a very small interaction effect ( $\beta = -0.002$ ) with an  $R^2$  of 0.13, and the p-value of 0.292 was not significant. The partial eta-squared ( $\eta^2 = 0.028$ ) indicated a negligible effect, suggesting that education level does not significantly influence the effect of TPS on decision-making.

Similarly, Hypothesis 5b, which examined the moderation effect of educational level on the relationship between TPS and problem-solving, showed no significant moderation. The interaction term ( $\beta = -0.009$ ) produced a small  $R^2$  of 0.006 and a non-significant p-value of 0.764, with an effect size ( $\eta^2 = 0.063$ ) suggesting no meaningful moderation for education level on the relationship.

In Hypothesis 5c, the interaction between TPS and education level on creativity also did not show any significant moderation, with a small coefficient ( $\beta = 0.042$ ), an  $R^2$  of 0.056, and a p-value of 0.330. The partial eta-squared ( $\eta^2 = 0.063$ ) further confirmed the lack of a meaningful moderating effect. Finally, Hypothesis 5d, which posited that education moderates the relationship between TPS and internal service quality, also yielded non-significant results, with an interaction term ( $\beta = 0.008$ ), an  $R^2$  of 0.023, and a p-value of 0.804, indicating no moderation.

This study revealed whether educational level moderates the relationship between Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) and four dimensions of work performance—decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, and internal service quality. Contrary to expectations, the findings revealed that educational attainment did not significantly moderate any of these relationships. The non-significant interaction terms across all hypotheses (H5a–H5d) indicate that the effect of TPS on work performance is consistent regardless of an employee's level of education. In other words, employees with higher educational credentials are not insulated from the detrimental effects of TPS, nor are those with lower educational backgrounds more susceptible. This lack of moderating influence suggests that TPS operates through mechanisms that transcend formal education, such as workplace culture, peer relationships, and psychological climate.

The small  $R^2$  values observed across all moderation models reinforce this conclusion. These values, which ranged from .006 to .13, demonstrate that educational level explains very little of the variance in how TPS affects work performance. This points to the limited role of education as a contextual buffer in the TPS–performance link. Instead, TPS may undermine performance through universally experienced psychological processes—such as reduced self-esteem, fear of standing out, or interpersonal strain—that are not meaningfully altered by educational background. This finding aligns with research suggesting that social evaluative threats, such as criticism or resentment toward high performers, tend to impact employees broadly, regardless of professional qualifications.

Table 4. Moderating Effect of Educational Level between TPS and Work Performance Indicators

|                                   | <b>R<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>F</b> | <b>p</b> | <b>Partial η<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>Interpretation</b> | <b>Decision</b> |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|----------|----------|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| <b>H5a. TPS*Edu -&gt; (-) DM</b>  | 0.13 (-.002)         | 1.239    | .292     | .028                         | No moderation         | Not supported   |
| <b>H5b. TPS*Edu -&gt; (-) PS</b>  | .006 (-.009)         | .270     | .764     | .063                         | No moderation         | Not supported   |
| <b>H5c. TPS*Edu -&gt; (-) CR</b>  | .056 (.042)          | 1.115    | .330     | .063                         | No moderation         | Not supported   |
| <b>H5d. TPS*Edu -&gt; (-) ISQ</b> | .023 (.008)          | .218     | .804     | .027                         | No moderation         | Not supported   |

TPS=tall poppy syndrome; DM=decision-making; PS=problem-solving; CR=creativity; ISQ=internal service quality

Collectively, these findings suggest that while education does not alter the relationship between TPS and work performance, TPS itself remains a potent organizational phenomenon with the capacity to undermine creative output. The results imply that interventions targeting TPS should focus on organizational culture, leadership practices, and peer norms, rather than on employee characteristics such as educational attainment. Addressing TPS may be particularly critical for organizations that rely on innovation, idea generation, and proactive problem-solving. By fostering environments where high achievers are supported rather than resented, organizations may mitigate the detrimental effects of TPS and preserve the creativity essential for organizational growth.

## Conclusion

The research findings present a nuanced perspective on Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) and its effect on work performance, both confirming and challenging existing literature. While the hypothesis predicted negative effects across all performance indicators, the results revealed that TPS had no significant effect on decision-making, problem-solving, or internal service quality. This contrasts with previous studies suggesting TPS consistently undermines these aspects of performance (Billan, 2019; Dediu, 2015). For instance, Dediu (2015) argued that TPS erodes decision-making by increasing avoidance behaviors, while Billan (2019) found that most professionals faced backlash for their achievements. However, the absence of significant negative effects in this study may be attributed to SPCF's core values—service, professionalism, competence, and fellowship—along with its emphasis on continuous learning (SPCF, n.d.), which could mitigate TPS by formalizing recognition and fostering a collaborative culture. Feather et al. (1991) noted that humility in success reduces resentment, suggesting that SPCF's work environment may buffer against TPS's typical consequences.

As far as the description statistics are concerned, the constructs are internally consistent that the observed decision-making, problem-solving, and internal service quality of the faculty and staff seem to have in some way prevailed against the efficacy of TPS. On the other hand, the unpredicted positive relationship between TPS and creativity gives a counterpoint to the argument that TPS negatively affects work performance. This stands against Dediu (2015), who argued that TPS stifles innovation but is supported by studies suggesting that adversity in the workplace can embrace creative problem-solving. As discussed by Zhang et al. (2024), envy, along with TPS, is a frequent companion; it gives motivation for employees to prove their worth with new ideas. It was not strange, then, to link workplace challenges to greater self-efficacy regarding one's job, which is likely to fuel creative output; Yang et al. (2021). In the competitive academic environment of SPCF, therefore, TPS could be expected to motivate rather than constrain one's efforts in the forging of new paths for overcoming organizational hurdles. This is quite different from the assertions of Breidenthal et al. (2020) to link TPS with ostracism and suppressed creativity. The reason for the variance may be attributed to cultural difference; collectivist traditions of the Philippines (Hui & Triandis, 1986) could turn TPS to a stimulus towards collaborative innovation, and on top of that, individualistic culture might be harsher on punishing its high achievers (Kim & Markus, 1999).

Educational level did not moderate the relationship between TPS and work performance, challenging Williams and Foti's (2011) assertion that higher education buffers against TPS. Human Capital Theory posits

that education increases professional visibility (Becker, 1993), but SPCF's egalitarian culture may neutralize this effect. Feather (1994) emphasized that in collectivist settings, group harmony often supersedes individual credentials, potentially explaining why educational level did not influence TPS effects in this context. The predominance of Bachelor's degrees suggests that the findings may be more representative of this group, while the substantial share of Master's degree holders allows for meaningful comparisons between educational levels. However, the limited number of Doctorate holders may restrict detailed analysis of this subgroup. Further research should account for this stratification, particularly if educational level is a key variable, to ensure accurate interpretations and comparisons between "less educated" and "higher educated" respondents.

These findings complicate the classical view of TPS as uniformly negative. They bolster some earlier research on creativity (Dedi, 2015) while at the same time disputing certain assumptions regarding contradictions in some dimensions of performance. The study reveals how the manifestation of TPS is influenced by the underlying institutional values and the cultural context. From the position of SPCF, the emphasis on fellowship and continuous learning seems to offset a lot of the negative consequences of TPS while redirecting its competitive features into creative productivity. This supports the findings of Kim and Markus (1999) on cross-cultural differences in society's responses to high-achieving individuals. Critics might argue that TPS's effect on creativity could be more negative than positive, bringing possible burnout (Sucgang, 2023), but the amicable structure of SPCF would favor an innovation environment that is stable rather than chaotic as far as creativity is concerned.

## Theoretical Implications

The unexpected positive relationship between Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) and creativity challenges dominant management theories and calls for a deeper theoretical reconsideration that integrates cultural perspectives. Rather than aligning with traditional assumptions that TPS uniformly suppresses innovative behavior, the results reveal that under certain cultural conditions, experiences of TPS may actually stimulate creative output. This finding exposes important gaps in current understandings of how TPS interacts with individual characteristics, such as educational level, and highlights the need for theoretical expansion.

From a Human Capital Theory (HCT) standpoint (Becker, 1964), the results complicate the assumption that increased human capital naturally leads to proportional performance gains or buffers individuals from workplace adversity. HCT suggests that educational attainment should mitigate the negative effects of workplace hostility, yet the study found no moderating effect of education on TPS. This indicates that TPS may function as a "social tax" on human capital (Bills, 2003), one that impacts employees regardless of their formal qualifications. The findings support emerging arguments that social and cultural contexts significantly mediate the translation of human capital into performance outcomes.

Similarly, the results problematize the assumptions of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) theory (Pfeffer, 1998). SHRM traditionally emphasizes the role of formal HR systems in shaping performance, but this study illustrates how informal social dynamics such as TPS, can act as parallel regulatory systems. In some contexts, these informal forces may undermine HR objectives, while in others they may unexpectedly reinforce them. This aligns with the social context perspective of SHRM (Ferris et al., 2007), which argues that workplace culture and interpersonal norms exert substantial influence on HR system effectiveness.

A deeper cultural analysis helps explain why TPS may show a positive association with creativity in the Philippine context. The Philippines is characterized by strong collectivist values (Hui & Triandis, 1986), where social harmony, relational sensitivity, and group cohesion are prioritized. In collectivist environments, social pressure, including subtle forms of criticism or group-based expectations- may function not merely as punitive mechanisms but as motivational cues that encourage individuals to adapt, improve, or demonstrate value to the

collective. This dynamic aligns with Amabile's (1996) componential theory of creativity, which emphasizes the importance of social and contextual factors in stimulating creative expression.

In contrast, in highly individualistic cultures such as Australia, the United States, or the United Kingdom- contexts where TPS is traditionally studied, TPS is more often viewed as hostility toward high achievers and therefore suppressive of creativity, risk-taking, and initiative. This cross-cultural divergence underscores the possibility that TPS is not a universal phenomenon with uniform effects, but rather a culturally contingent social dynamic whose outcomes vary based on prevailing norms regarding status, achievement, and interpersonal expectations.

Taken together, these insights highlight the need for a more integrative theoretical model that situates human capital, organizational systems, and social context within a shared explanatory framework. While HCT focuses on individual capabilities and SHRM emphasizes structured organizational mechanisms, the present findings underscore the critical mediating role of cultural and interpersonal dynamics. Recognizing how workplace culture shapes the effects of TPS offers scholars and practitioners a more nuanced understanding of performance-related behaviors and reveals that phenomena often assumed to be universally negative may hold different meanings and consequences across cultural settings.

## Practical Implications

Paradoxically, Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS), in relation to Systems Plus College Foundation, seems to take on a role entirely different for itself. Rather than solely suppressing high achievement, TPS can, under certain conditions, stimulate innovation and drive performance. This finding challenges the conventional view of TPS as purely detrimental and suggests that, within supportive academic environments, it may generate constructive tension that encourages creativity.

However, these observations should not be generalized to all organizational contexts. SPCF's academic environment differs markedly from corporate, government, or other industry settings, which often feature more rigid hierarchies and performance pressures. In such environments, TPS has traditionally been associated with reduced collaboration, stifled innovation, and negative morale. Therefore, organizations should avoid assuming universal applicability and instead evaluate their own cultural and structural dynamics before implementing interventions.

To translate these insights into actionable strategies, organizations can adopt targeted measures informed by Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) principles. Structured peer-mentoring programs, for example, can encourage knowledge sharing, reduce perceived inequities, and provide social support to high performers, mitigating negative aspects of TPS while enhancing collaboration. Regular monitoring of reward distribution ensures fairness, reduces professional jealousy, and aligns formal HR systems with organizational objectives. TPS-awareness training can help employees and leaders recognize subtle forms of the phenomenon such as credit appropriation, social exclusion, or public criticism, and respond proactively, fostering psychological safety and reinforcing a culture of recognition. Clear feedback mechanisms and transparent career pathways further reduce ambiguity, link achievement to advancement, and support both high-performing individuals and their teams.

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping the outcomes of TPS. By observing the effects of interventions and adjusting strategies accordingly, leaders can amplify the positive potential of TPS such as motivation and innovation, while minimizing its harmful impacts. Structured recognition systems and collaborative environments act as protective buffers, supporting high performers without creating resentment or undermining colleagues. Ultimately, TPS should not be viewed solely as a negative social phenomenon but as a context-dependent force that, if properly managed, can contribute to constructive organizational outcomes. By

aligning interventions with organizational culture, institutions can channel the tension inherent in TPS toward innovation, collaboration, and overall performance improvement.

## **Limitation and Future Direction**

Exploring the effects of Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) on work performance indicators provides valuable insights, yet several limitations should be considered. First, the study was conducted solely within a private higher education context—Systems Plus College Foundation (SPCF). The unique organizational culture of SPCF, which emphasizes service, professionalism, competence, and fellowship, may have mitigated the overall negative effects of TPS. Consequently, the findings may not fully generalize to more competitive, hierarchical, or culturally distinct environments.

Although the sample size of 204 participants was sufficient for statistical analyses, it was relatively small and skewed. Most participants were full-time faculty and staff holding bachelor's degrees, with very few doctorate holders. This limited representation may partly explain why educational level did not significantly moderate the relationship between TPS and work performance, suggesting that future studies should employ more stratified and diverse samples. Additionally, the study collected only educational level as a demographic variable, omitting other potentially influential characteristics such as age, gender, tenure, and departmental affiliation. The absence of these variables restricts the ability to assess sample representativeness or explore how these factors might moderate the effects of TPS.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported performance measures, which are susceptible to biases such as social desirability and recall error. The cross-sectional design further limits the ability to infer causal relationships between TPS and performance outcomes. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs to examine the long-term development of TPS and its impact on organizational behavior. Incorporating objective performance metrics or multi-source assessments (e.g., peer or supervisor ratings) would strengthen validity and methodological rigor.

The study also did not examine other potential moderators and mediators that could influence the TPS–performance relationship. Variables such as gender, age, organizational tenure, generational cohort, leadership styles, organizational policies, and personality traits could provide a more nuanced understanding of how TPS develops and affects employee outcomes. Expanding research to include multiple industries, cross-cultural settings, and larger, more representative samples would enhance generalizability. Comparative studies between collectivist and individualist cultures could clarify how cultural norms shape the effects of TPS, particularly regarding its paradoxical impact on creativity.

Mixed-methods approaches, combining surveys with qualitative interviews or focus groups, could provide richer context for understanding employees lived experiences with TPS. Investigating the intersection of TPS with related workplace phenomena—such as burnout, job satisfaction, collaboration, and employee retention—would further illuminate its organizational consequences.

Importantly, this study does not advocate for the tolerance of TPS. Rather, it highlights its ambivalent nature: TPS may spur short-term creativity under certain conditions but can simultaneously weaken long-term collaboration, morale, and organizational cohesion. Institutional leaders should work to mitigate the harmful effects of TPS while acknowledging any incidental benefits, such as healthy competition and innovation. By framing TPS as a multifaceted phenomenon rather than solely a destructive force, organizations can develop context-aware strategies to harness its potential while protecting employee well-being.

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