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Satisfied but Strained? Limits of job satisfaction in safeguarding mental health of offshore oil & gas employees in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of job satisfaction on the mental health of 364 offshore oil and gas (O&G) employees in Malaysia. Using PLS-SEM, results show that job satisfaction reduces anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress by fostering purpose and organizational belonging. However, its protective effect is constrained by structural factors such as job insecurity, organizational hierarchy, and mental health stigma. While supportive supervision and role clarity offer partial relief, a rigid work culture and limited psychological safety weaken this effect. The findings underscore the need to integrate job satisfaction into broader systemic efforts to improve offshore psychological well-being.

Keywords: job satisfaction; mental health; offshore; oil and gas

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1.0 Introduction

The offshore oil and gas (O&G) sector is widely recognized as a high-risk and high-pressure work environment. Offshore employees are routinely exposed to extended work rotations, irregular schedules, hazardous operational conditions, and prolonged separation from family, all of which impose substantial psychological strain. Empirical evidence consistently reports elevated levels of anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress among offshore workers worldwide, with these concerns intensifying during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior research links such outcomes to isolation, uncertainty, and limited organizational support, compounded by restricted access to mental health services, persistent stigma surrounding psychological problems, and masculine work norms that discourage emotional expression (Sutherland & Cooper, 2022; Khan & Mahmood, 2024).

Similar challenges have been documented in the Malaysian offshore context. Employees operating in Sabah, Sarawak, Kelantan, and Terengganu report considerable emotional strain despite indicating moderate levels of job satisfaction and perceived social support. Recent evidence highlights low perceived job security among Malaysian offshore workers, with an average score of 2.06 on a five-point scale (Rani et al., 2024). This finding points to a critical psychosocial vulnerability that may weaken the protective role commonly attributed to job satisfaction. While supportive work environments and collegial relationships may offer partial relief, structural constraints

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such as precarious employment arrangements, rigid hierarchical management, and enduring mental health stigma remain prominent and insufficiently addressed sources of stress.

Job satisfaction is widely regarded as an important component of occupational well-being, often associated with stronger organizational attachment and reduced psychological distress. Within occupational health research, it is commonly conceptualized as a psychological buffer that mitigates the adverse effects of demanding work conditions. However, in high-risk and structurally constrained settings such as offshore O&G operations, the buffering capacity of job satisfaction may be limited. Satisfaction derived from task characteristics or interpersonal relations may be insufficient to counteract persistent stressors such as job insecurity, inflexible supervisory practices, and limited psychological safety.

This perspective aligns with the Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) framework, which emphasizes that employee mental health is shaped by organizational policies, practices, and management commitment to psychological well-being. When PSC is weak, individual-level resources such as job satisfaction may fail to translate into meaningful mental health protection. Employees may continue to experience emotional fatigue and psychological strain despite being satisfied with certain aspects of their work (Dollard et al., 2024). In offshore environments, where operational efficiency and physical safety are often prioritized, psychological risks may receive comparatively less organizational attention.

Despite growing international interest in offshore mental health, empirical evidence from Southeast Asian contexts remains limited. Much of the existing literature focuses on onshore or corporate settings, where psychosocial risk profiles and access to support differ markedly from offshore environments (Roberts & Flin, 2025; Nittari et al., 2024). These gaps were further exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when movement restrictions, reduced crew rotations, and heightened job insecurity intensified psychological strain (Gupta & Dhar, 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the role of job satisfaction in shaping mental health outcomes among 364 offshore O&G employees in Malaysia. Using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the study evaluates whether job satisfaction mediates the relationship between psychosocial factors and mental health within a structurally demanding offshore context. By situating job satisfaction within broader organizational constraints, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of occupational mental health in high-risk industries.

2.0 Literature Review

The offshore O&G sector have received increasing attention in occupational health research due to its distinctive psychosocial demands. Offshore work is characterized by extended deployments, physical isolation, restricted mobility, and continuous exposure to hazardous conditions, which collectively contribute to sustained psychological strain. Empirical studies consistently report higher levels of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress among offshore employees compared to onshore workers. Prolonged remote work and rotational schedules further erode emotional resilience, particularly when access to psychosocial support is limited (Bojczuk et al., 2024).

Mental health outcomes in offshore settings are shaped not only by environmental exposure but also by organizational structures. Job design, communication transparency, and hierarchical supervision influence how stressors are experienced and internalized. Evidence indicates that emotional exhaustion and psychological disengagement are more pronounced in environments with limited decision-making autonomy and weak leadership connection, underscoring the central role of organizational dynamics in offshore mental health risk (Khan & Mahmood, 2024).

Job satisfaction is commonly conceptualized as a protective resource in occupational psychology and is associated with improved emotional regulation and organizational commitment (Wang, 2024). However, in high-risk sectors such as offshore O&G, its buffering capacity may be constrained. Satisfaction in these contexts is highly dependent on the availability and stability of job resources, including role clarity, supervisory feedback, and social support, which are often inconsistent offshore.

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model provides a useful framework for understanding these limitations (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013). According to the model, demanding conditions such as long working hours, social isolation, and high responsibility require adequate job resources to prevent burnout. When resources are insufficient, job satisfaction alone may fail to protect mental well-being. Empirical evidence supports this view, showing that the buffering effect of satisfaction emerges primarily when organizational and social support are present (Chang et al., 2023).

Job insecurity further weakens the protective role of job satisfaction. While satisfaction may offer short-term emotional relief, its impact diminishes when employees perceive their employment as unstable. Among contract-based offshore workers, satisfaction has been shown to have limited influence on emotional exhaustion when fear of job loss is salient (Styrvold & Olsen, 2025). This distinction highlights the difference between intrinsic satisfaction and broader existential concerns shaped by employment conditions.

The psychosocial safety climate (PSC) framework reinforces this argument by emphasizing organizational responsibility for psychological health. When management commitment to mental well-being is weak, individual resources such as job satisfaction lose their protective capacity (Dollard et al., 2024). In Malaysia, emerging evidence suggests that offshore employees report moderate satisfaction alongside persistently poor mental health outcomes, driven by job insecurity, unclear supervision, and limited mental health literacy (Gazi et al., 2025). Collectively, the literature indicates that job satisfaction alone is insufficient to safeguard mental health in offshore settings without supportive organizational structures and a psychologically safe climate.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative design to examine the relationship between psychosocial factors and mental health outcomes among offshore O&G employees in Malaysia, with the insertion of job satisfaction as a mediator. The research focused on assessing how job satisfaction influences their mental health and accounting for the psychosocial factors in their working life.

Participants and Sampling

Malaysia's offshore workforce comprises approximately 12,254 employees (Human Resources Development Fund [HRDF], 2019). Using proportionate stratified random sampling, a sample size of 412 employees was determined following Van Haute (2021). A total of 442 offshore oil and gas employees participated in the study, including 30 respondents from the pilot phase. After data screening and cleaning, 364 responses were retained for final analysis. Participants were recruited from offshore operational sites in Kelantan, Terengganu, Sabah, and Sarawak. Eligibility criteria included Malaysian nationality, current offshore employment with a minimum of one year of experience, and proficiency in Malay or English. Additionally, the questionnaire is conducted with bilingual. The questionnaire was content-validated by two experts in organizational behavior from the Research University and one industry expert from the O&G sector prior to data collection. The final sample represented multiple organizational levels, including technicians, engineers, and supervisory personnel, covering both manual and professional occupational categories. Table 1 demonstrated how the calculation of the sample size was done.

Table 1. O&G offshore operating organizations

State	Operating Organizations in Malaysia by proportionate	Samples based on proportionate
Sabah	Six organizations consisting of 408 offshore employees	35% = 143 employees
Sarawak	Five organizations consisting of 340 offshore employees	30% = 102 employees
Peninsular	Seven organizations consisting of 476 offshore employees	35% = 167 employees
TOTAL		412 employees

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire. The instrument included validated scales adapted from previous studies to assess key constructs. Job satisfaction was measured using a research version of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ III), which evaluates satisfaction across intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. All instruments were pre-tested for linguistic clarity and reliability in a pilot study involving 30 offshore employees not included in the final sample. Cronbach's alpha values for each construct exceeded 0.80, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Data Collection Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from a university research ethics committee REC/05/2023 (PG/MR/168). Data collection was conducted between 22 May 2023 to 31 December 2023 through digital dissemination of questionnaires during pre-departure briefings and during securing company communication platforms. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, assured of anonymity, and informed that participation was voluntary. No incentives were provided.

Data Analysis

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyze the data, as this approach is suitable for predictive modeling and theory testing in complex models with latent constructs. SmartPLS 4 software was employed for the analysis. The modeling process followed two main stages: first, evaluation of the measurement model to assess construct validity and reliability, and second, assessment of the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships. For the measurement model, indicator reliability was evaluated through factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratio. All latent constructs met the thresholds for convergent and discriminant validity. Full collinearity variance inflation factors (VIFs) were also assessed to check for multicollinearity, with all VIFs below the recommended threshold of 3.3. In the structural model, path coefficients were calculated through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to assess the significance of hypothesized relationships. Coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect sizes (f^2) were also examined to evaluate the model's explanatory power. Additionally, predictive relevance (Q^2) was assessed using blindfolding procedures.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were provided with an informed consent form detailing their rights, the confidentiality of their responses, and the voluntary nature of their participation. All data were anonymized before analysis. The study did not involve any interventions or collection of sensitive personal data. Ethical approval reference number and details can be provided upon request.

4.0 Results

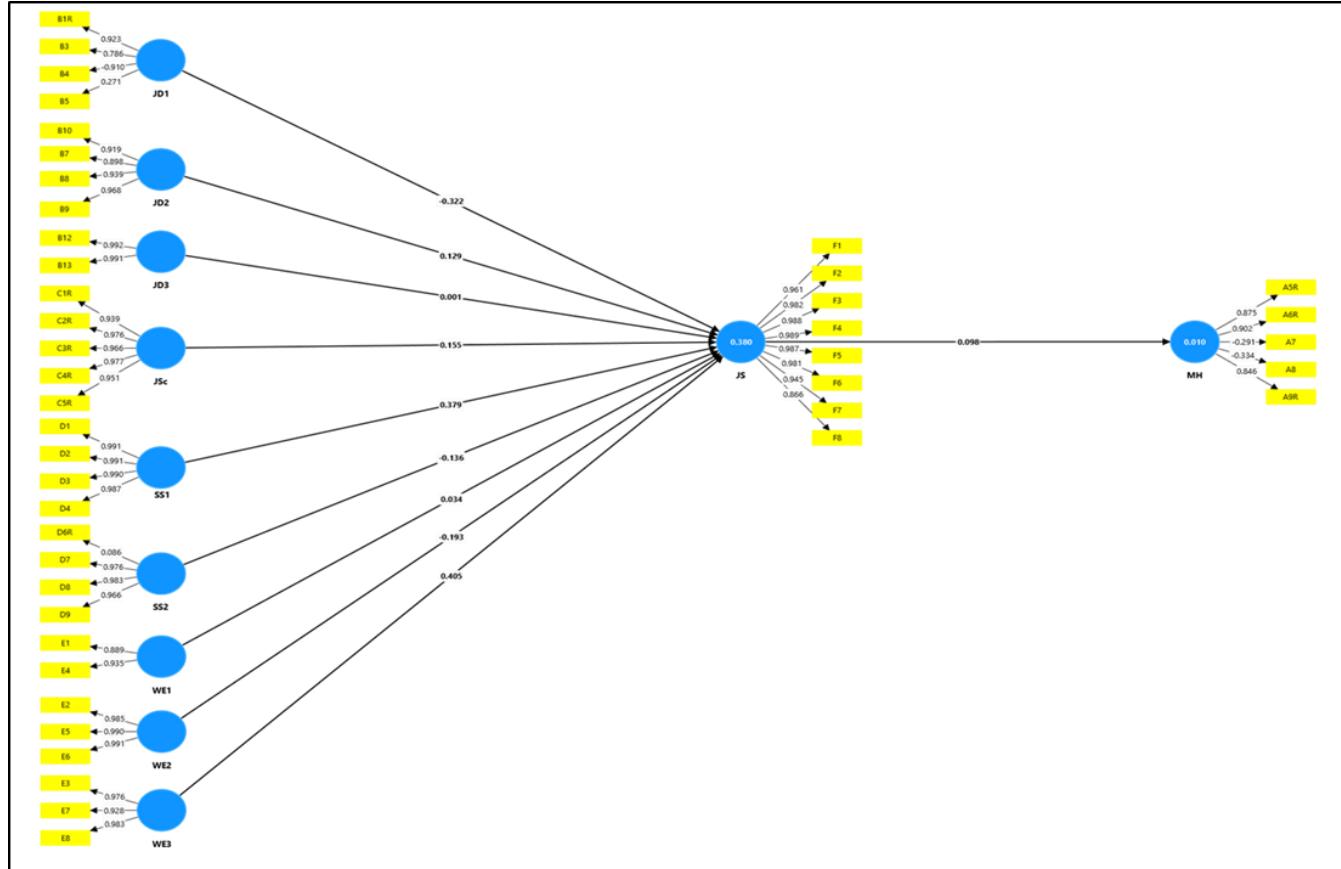


Figure 1: Path Coefficients for mediation paths

This study evaluated the mediating effect of job satisfaction on the relationship between psychosocial risk factors and mental health using the product of coefficients method as described by MacKinnon et al. (2007). This method assesses the significance of indirect effects by computing the product of the path coefficients along the mediated pathways. A mediation effect is deemed statistically significant when the associated p-value is below 0.05 ($p < 0.05$).

Three out of eight hypotheses were confirmed regarding the role of job satisfaction in mediating the correlation between psychosocial risk variables and employees' mental health state. More precisely, the study discovered that job satisfaction had a mediating role in the correlation between quantitative demands and mental health state ($p < 0.05$), the correlation between job security and mental health state ($p < 0.05$), and the correlation between social support and mental health state ($p < 0.05$). However, job satisfaction was not found to mediate the correlation between cognitive demands and mental health state ($p > 0.05$), the correlation between demands for responsibility and mental health state ($p > 0.05$), the correlation between social relations and mental health state ($p > 0.05$), the correlation between degree of freedom and mental health state ($p > 0.05$), the correlation between sense of community and mental health state ($p > 0.05$), and lastly the correlation between meaning of work and mental health state ($p > 0.05$).

5.0 Discussions

This study provides evidence that job satisfaction is strongly associated with better mental health outcomes among offshore O&G employees in Malaysia, particularly when it is supported by a conducive work environment and robust social support. The findings indicate that job satisfaction plays a protective role by reducing anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress. However, this protective role is most effective when job satisfaction is underpinned by supportive conditions, specifically a stable and healthy work environment and strong interpersonal relationships within the organization.

The work environment emerged as one of the most influential components linked to job satisfaction. Offshore employees who perceived their workspace as clean, safe, and well-maintained were more likely to report satisfaction in their roles. This is not surprising given the physically confined and high-risk nature of offshore operations (Roberts & Flin, 2025). Employees who feel physically safe and have access to adequate facilities experience fewer environmental stressors, which in turn lowers emotional strain. A well-organized and resourceful work environment contributes to a sense of predictability, order, and comfort, which are known to promote psychological resilience. In the absence of such conditions, even routine tasks can become sources of chronic stress, leading to gradual emotional deterioration (Kang et al., 2024).

Social support also plays a crucial role in enhancing job satisfaction and, consequently, mental health. In this study, employees who reported strong collegial relationships and received consistent support from supervisors showed higher satisfaction levels and lower

psychological distress. The presence of supportive co-employees and approachable supervisors helps to buffer the impact of isolation, long shifts, and operational pressures. This form of support offers emotional validation and practical assistance, making it easier for employees to manage their responsibilities and express concerns without fear of judgment. The relational aspect of offshore work, therefore, cannot be overlooked. When social ties within the team are strong, job satisfaction becomes more resilient, and psychological health is better maintained. These findings reinforce earlier research showing that job satisfaction is not only about task enjoyment or compensation (Davari & Kim, 2025; Zakariah et al., 2024). It is deeply embedded in the quality of the work environment and the social dynamics within the organization. Wang and colleagues have noted that employees derive satisfaction not only from what they do but also from where and with whom they do it. This perspective is particularly relevant in offshore settings, where physical isolation and long rotations intensify the need for a psychologically safe and socially cohesive work environment.

While job satisfaction clearly contributes to improved mental health, the study also reveals its limitations when broader structural constraints are present. One such constraint is job insecurity. Many offshore employees in Malaysia are employed on contract-based terms or are unsure of long-term employment prospects. This uncertainty introduces chronic stress that cannot be resolved by day-to-day job satisfaction alone. Employees may enjoy their current role, but the looming concern of job loss or lack of opportunities for progress undermines their sense of stability. As a result, the mental health benefits of job satisfaction are weakened by a lack of long-term employment assurance.

Mental health stigma presents another barrier. In many offshore settings, discussing psychological struggles is still perceived as a sign of weakness. This cultural norm discourages open communication and emotional expression, reducing opportunities for intervention or support. Even when satisfaction with the work environment and team dynamics is high, stigma can lead employees to internalize their stress and avoid seeking help. This undermines the relational and environmental support systems that otherwise contribute positively to mental well-being. Supervisory support and role clarity were identified as key reinforcing factors. Employees who reported clear job expectations and constructive feedback from supervisors experienced greater stability in their job satisfaction. Clear roles reduce ambiguity and enhance confidence in task execution, while supportive supervisors foster a sense of psychological safety. In this way, job satisfaction becomes more stable and effective as a buffer against emotional exhaustion. Supervisory behaviors also shape team culture, setting the tone for how acceptable it is to express concerns and ask for help.

Theoretically, these findings extend the Job Demands-Resources model by highlighting how job satisfaction interacts with specific job resources to influence psychological outcomes. In this model, job satisfaction acts not only as an outcome but also as a mediating condition that translates environmental and social support into emotional well-being. However, the model must also account for organizational constraints such as job insecurity and stigma, which can diminish the effectiveness of otherwise strong resources. In the offshore O&G sector, the implications of this relationship are significant. Improving job satisfaction should not be limited to task design or compensation. Organizations must also prioritize investment in better physical work environments, promote supervisor training in supportive communication, and encourage a culture that normalizes mental health conversations. In doing so, they can enhance the impact of job satisfaction and create a more sustainable foundation for employee well-being.

Job satisfaction plays a critical role in promoting mental health among offshore oil and gas employees, particularly when it is supported by a healthy work environment and strong social support. However, structural and cultural constraints must be addressed to maximize its protective effect. The findings point to the need for an integrated approach that combines satisfaction-driven strategies with broader organizational reforms aimed at fostering psychological safety and employment stability.

6.0 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation of the relationships between psychosocial factors, job satisfaction, and mental health. Although the findings demonstrate theoretically consistent associations, the data capture employee experiences at a single time point and cannot account for changes across offshore rotation cycles or shifting organizational conditions. Future longitudinal designs are needed to assess temporal dynamics. Second, all variables were measured using self-reported questionnaires, which may be influenced by common method variance and social desirability bias. This limitation is particularly relevant in offshore settings, where mental health stigma and masculine work norms may discourage full disclosure of psychological distress. Consequently, reported mental health outcomes may underestimate actual levels of strain despite the use of validated measures.

7.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study affirms that job satisfaction plays a meaningful yet constrained role in supporting the mental health of offshore oil and gas employees in Malaysia. While higher satisfaction, especially when supported by conducive work environments and strong social relationships, is associated with lower levels of anxiety and emotional exhaustion, its protective effect is moderated by structural and cultural factors. Persistent job insecurity, rigid organizational hierarchies, and stigma surrounding mental health continue to diminish the capacity of job satisfaction to fully safeguard psychological well-being. To address these limitations, broader organizational reforms are necessary. Employers should prioritize psychological health alongside safety and productivity by embedding mental health into their operational policies. This includes implementing transparent employment contracts, restructuring supervisory models to encourage participative leadership, and normalizing mental health conversations through targeted anti-stigma training.

It is recommended that offshore organizations adopt a psychosocial safety climate (PSC) approach by institutionalizing routine mental health audits, anonymous employee feedback systems, and embedded support services. Future research should operationalize

these reforms using validated PSC instruments and apply longitudinal designs to track their impact on psychological outcomes over time. By combining job satisfaction efforts with structural and cultural change, the offshore sector can move toward a more psychologically sustainable work environment.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the field of Organizational Behavior by offering empirical insights into the role of psychosocial factors and job satisfaction in shaping mental health outcomes among offshore oil and gas employees. The findings enrich existing knowledge by highlighting how work environment conditions and social support systems interact with job satisfaction to influence psychological well-being. This study provides theoretical value to scholars, practical implications for organizational leaders, and applied relevance for students and practitioners seeking to understand mental health dynamics in high-risk, resource-constrained work settings. It also adds to the limited body of research on organizational behavior within offshore industrial contexts, particularly in Malaysia.

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