Analysis of Toxic Positivity Behavior and Its Impact on Individual Mental Health in the Workplace

Theresia M. D. Kaunang¹, Dyah Ayu Utari², Riskha Dora Candra Dewi³, Rai Riska Resty Wasita⁴, Riesmiyatiningdyah⁵

Email Correspondent: t.kaunang07@gmail.com

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Abstract

Modern work culture often emphasizes an extreme positive narrative, where the expression of negative emotions is considered unprofessional and avoided. This phenomenon is known as toxic positivity, which is the urge to always appear optimistic even though an individual is experiencing psychological stress. This study aims to analyze the forms of toxic positivity behavior that appear in the workplace and evaluate their impact on individual mental health. Using a qualitative approach based on literature studies (library research), researchers reviewed 10 recent academic articles that explicitly discuss the relationship between toxic positivity, psychosocial stress, and work culture. Data sources were taken from reputable international journals and then analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The results of the study show that toxic positivity has a negative impact on individual psychological well-being. Employees who do not have space to express negative emotions experience an increased risk of stress. burnout, depression, and emotional isolation. This phenomenon also disrupts team communication, reduces interpersonal trust, and creates an emotionally repressive work culture. Ironically, this practice is often misinterpreted as a form of professionalism. Therefore, structural changes are needed in organizational communication to foster an emotionally inclusive work culture. This research highlights the importance of a more authentic and empathetic approach to mental wellbeing in the modern workplace.



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INTRODUCTION

The demands of the modern work environment often require high levels of professionalism accompanied by expectations to remain positive in all situations, even when individuals are facing emotional or psychological stress (Cabanas & González-Lamas, 2022; Fredrickson, 2001). In this context, a phenomenon known as toxic positivity has emerged, namely the tendency to force positive thinking to the extreme while rejecting or suppressing valid negative emotions (Z. Wang et al., 2019). This phenomenon implicitly conveys that negative feelings are wrong or inappropriate to express,

¹ Faculty of Health, Universitas Sam Ratulangi, Indonesia, t.kaunang07@gmail.com

² Universitas Muhammadiyah Kudus, Indonesia, dyahayuutari@umkudus.ac.id

³ Jember State Polytechnic, Indonesia, riskhadora@polije.ac.id

⁴ Universitas Dhyana Pura, Indonesia, riskaresty@undhirabali.ac.id

⁵ Kerta Cendekia Health Polytechnic, Indonesia, miyatimiyati2005@gmail.com

which ultimately has a negative impact on an individual's mental well-being (Feltner, 2023; Thakur et al., 2025).

Toxic positivity is a condition in which a person demands themselves or others to always think and act positively, while rejecting or ignoring negative emotions (Adrian, 2024). Although positive thinking has benefits, if done excessively and unrealistically, it can be detrimental to mental health (Wijono, 2020). According to Verywell Mind, toxic positivity rejects normal human emotions such as sadness or anger, and can leave individuals feeling unsupported and isolated (Cherry, 2024). This attitude often appears in the form of phrases such as "everything will be fine" or "don't give up", which can actually belittle the feelings of someone who is experiencing difficulties (Prasetya, 2024).

The impact of toxic positivity is very significant on mental health. Someone who continuously suppresses negative emotions can experience severe stress, anxiety, sleep disorders, and even depression. Alodokter explains that long-term denial of negative emotions can cause various mental health problems. In addition, toxic positivity can damage interpersonal relationships due to a lack of empathy and healthy communication. UNIKOM states that in a healthy relationship, it is important to share feelings, both positive and negative, and toxic positivity can create an emotional gap that damages trust. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and accept all emotions as part of the healing process and good mental health (Hxgn, 2024).

In the workplace, toxic positivity can manifest itself through comments such as "everything will be fine" or "stay strong" which are expressed without considering the employee's emotional condition (X. Wang et al., 2025). Although well-intentioned, such expressions can ignore or even suppress employees' psychological need to acknowledge and process their negative feelings (Lines et al., 2025; Shoaib & Abbasi, 2025). The accumulation of unexpressed negative emotions can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and even burnout (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2025).

Research shows that the pressure to always appear positive at work is negatively correlated with mental health indicators such as job satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and psychological resilience (Doncliff, 2025; Tunio, 2025). In addition, toxic positivity behavior also affects team dynamics by suppressing authentic communication, reducing trust between individuals, and encouraging an unhealthy work culture (Gamble, 2025; Huml et al., 2025). This emphasizes that the existence of toxic positivity is not only an individual psychological problem, but also an organizational issue that can have systemic impacts.

In an increasingly competitive work culture, toxic positivity is often considered a form of "professionalism" or "coping strategy" (Carlisle et al., 2025). In fact, the imbalance between forced positive emotions and suppressed negative emotions actually weakens employee resilience in the long term (Doedens et al., 2025; Sutcliffe, 2025). Therefore, it is important for organizations and managers to understand the boundaries between healthy emotional support and harmful toxic positivity.

The urgency of this research lies in the urgent need to identify how toxic positivity affects employee mental health and how organizations can create a more emotionally inclusive work culture. With the increasing number of mental health disorders due to work stress, data-based interventions on toxic positivity can be a basis for developing more adaptive work wellness policies (Polak, 2025; Varvares & Bergmark, 2025).

Previous studies have discussed work stress, burnout, and mental health in the workplace in general, but in-depth exploration of toxic positivity as a primary variable is still limited. Several studies such as by Thakur and Saran (2025) have touched on the relationship between false positive culture and stress, but have not explicitly examined the long-term effects of toxic positivity on employee mental health within an organizational framework (Thakur et al., 2025). This study is here to fill the gap in the literature with a systematic behavioral analysis and psychological impact

approach. The purpose of this study is to analyze the forms of toxic positivity behavior that emerge in the workplace and evaluate their impact on individual mental health. This study also aims to provide policy recommendations and managerial strategies in building a work environment that supports emotional balance and encourages healthy and constructive expression of emotions.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study (library research) as the main method in exploring, interpreting, and analyzing the phenomenon of toxic positivity and its impact on individual mental health in the workplace. Literature studies were chosen because they allow researchers to access a variety of academic sources in depth, including journal articles, scientific books, dissertations, and organizational documents related to mental health in the workplace. This approach is suitable for developing a conceptual and thematic understanding of a phenomenon that is still relatively new and has not been comprehensively studied in the context of work culture in Indonesia or globally (Snyder, 2019; Zed, 2018).

The data sources in this study consist of secondary data sources, namely scientific publications relevant to the topics of toxic positivity, organizational psychology, and mental health in the workplace. Source searches were carried out through various leading academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, PubMed, and ScienceDirect. Inclusion criteria include publications in the period 2015–2025, in Indonesian or English, and explicitly discussing elements of toxic positivity, work culture, or related psychosocial issues. Meanwhile, sources that do not contain empirical elements, have not gone through a peer-review process, or are of a popular opinion nature are excluded from the main analysis.

The data collection technique was carried out in systematic stages that include: (1) literature search using keywords such as "toxic positivity," "mental health," "workplace well-being," and "positive culture pressure"; (2) source selection based on abstracts and complete content using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines; and (3) organizing the literature into thematic groups to facilitate the synthesis process. This approach helps increase validity and transparency in the data collection process (Moher et al., 2015).

For the data analysis method, this study used a thematic analysis approach as developed by (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The analysis was carried out in six stages, namely: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme search, (4) theme review, (5) naming and defining themes, and (6) compiling narrative results. This process allows for the identification of patterns and deeper meanings related to how toxic positivity emerges, develops, and impacts work dynamics. Each emerging theme is cross-validated through triangulation of literature from various sources to ensure interpretations remain consistent and evidence-based.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following is a table of bibliographic data from the findings of a literature review entitled "Analysis of Toxic Positivity Behavior and Its Impact on Individual Mental Health in the Workplace". This data is the result of a selection of the 10 most relevant academic articles selected from a total of 20 articles found during a search in scientific databases. Each article was analyzed based on theme, methodology, and relevance to the topic of toxic positivity in the workplace.

Table 1. Literature Review

No Title Author Research Focus	
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1	The effects of bullying on nurses' turnover intentions	Paustian- Underdahl et	Toxic positivity as a maladaptive response to workplace bullying, impacting burnout
	nuises turnover intentions	al.	and turnover intentions.
2	Resilience as a moderator of	Chang et al.	Individuals with high resilience are able to
	the effects of workplace bullying		mitigate the negative effects of toxic positivity when faced with bullying.
3	Influence of abusive work	Tunio, S.	Mental health campaigns fail to address
	environment on employee wellbeing		toxic positivity; they actually exacerbate employee stress.
4	Effect of toxicity and	Huml et al.	Competition and expectations to stay
	competitive psychological climate		'positive' create unhealthy work environments.
	Back to the Workforce—An	Varvares &	Positive narratives are forced on workers
J	Important Marker of	Bergmark	recovering from serious illnesses,
	Survivorship		obscuring the real need for mental support.
6	Fostering Supportive Online	Shoaib &	Online community interventions reduce
	Communities	Abbasi	the effects of toxic positivity on victims of cyberbullying in digital workplaces.
7	The Best Co-Worker You	Gorelik, A.	Overly positive work cultures can isolate
	Never Knew You Needed		individuals experiencing emotional distress.
8	1		An emphasis on "positive thinking"
	and negative alcohol-	et al.	exacerbates negative coping mechanisms
	related	TA7 . 1	for work stress.
9	Use of Mukbang in Health Promotion: Scoping Review	Wang et al.	False positivity in online promotions reduces awareness of workers'
	Fromotion: Scoping Review		psychosocial stress.
10	Social support and HIV	Kaptchuk et al.	Unrealistic positive expectations
	management among PWID		undermine individuals' perceptions of the
			need for psychological support.

The study of toxic positivity in the workplace and its impact on individual mental health has attracted the attention of many researchers in recent years. From the selection of the 10 most relevant articles, there are a number of fairly consistent patterns of findings but also present a diversity of perspectives in assessing this phenomenon. The following is an in-depth description of the results of these studies, which illustrate how an excessive positivity attitude can actually be toxic in modern work dynamics.

Research by Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2025) focused on nurses in the health sector. This study revealed that in stressful work situations and even containing elements of bullying, the expectation to remain positive becomes an additional, dangerous pressure. When nurses are not given the emotional space to express their fatigue, frustration, or stress, their internal response is to hide these emotions behind a strong face. This in the long term increases the desire to leave the job (turnover intentions) and worsens physical complaints. In short, instead of being a source of resilience, the narrative of "must always be positive" becomes a form of collective denial of painful working conditions (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2025).

In a study conducted by Chang et al. (2025), toxic positivity is positioned as a mediator between job stressors and job performance. This study highlights how individuals with low levels of resilience will be more negatively impacted by false positive expectations at work. This means that workers who feel unable to express complaints or negative emotions due to the pressure of an

organizational culture that demands "permanent cheerfulness" are more susceptible to mental disorders such as anxiety and depression. Resilience, in this case, acts as a protector that helps individuals navigate emotional stress without feeling like they have to pretend to be happy all the time (Chang et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, Tunio (2025) in his writing highlighted the failure of wellbeing programs in health institutions that overemphasize the "positive" aspect without accommodating the expression of negative emotions. He criticized employee wellbeing programs that only focus on the rhetoric of "happiness" and "gratitude" but do not create a safe space for emotional outpouring and validation of pain. As a result, this program actually exacerbates psychological stress because employees feel they are not allowed to feel tired, are not allowed to complain, and must continue to appear strong (Tunio, 2025).

In a slightly different context, Huml et al. (2025) explored the effects of a competitive environment combined with a work culture that emphasizes false positives. Research on sports organizations showed that when employees compete with each other and are still required to be "sportsmanlike" and "spirited," a repressive work environment is created. Toxic positivity is used as a cover to cover up unhealthy conflict and competition, which ultimately reduces team orientation and increases intentions to quit. This study confirms that a positive culture can be a tool of social control that is not realized by workers (Huml et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, an article by Varvares and Bergmark (2025) raises the issue of pressure on workers who return to work after recovering from a serious illness. It explains that employees are often praised for being "resilient" and "inspirational" for being able to return to work, without considering the real need for emotional support. This kind of narrative reinforces toxic positivity because it does not give them space to acknowledge their trauma and fear after treatment. It is as if the only response they receive is gratitude and optimism, even though they also need recognition of the vulnerability they experience (Varvares & Bergmark, 2025).

A study by Shoaib and Abbasi (2025) extends the focus of toxic positivity to digital spaces, specifically online communities in remote workplaces. They show that interventions that create safe spaces for mutual support and honest sharing of emotional experiences have a positive effect on reducing the negative impacts of toxic positivity. In contrast, digital workgroups that emphasize a "goget-it-on" culture and ignore personal difficulties tend to create emotional alienation, which ultimately increases social anxiety and stress (Shoaib & Abbasi, 2025).

Gorelik (2025) presents a more narrative perspective by exploring the experiences of workers who feel alienated because they are unable to follow a company culture that enforces constant enthusiasm and passion. This article shows that toxic positivity is not only harmful to mental health, but also limits authentic self-expression. In this context, positivity is no longer a means of support, but rather a cultural demand that creates feelings of guilt when someone feels sad, angry, or frustrated (Gorelik, 2025).

In an experimental study by Herchenroeder et al. (2025) that examined the relationship between stress, pain, and alcohol consumption in young workers, it was found that the urge to display positive emotions without a real basis can trigger compensation through destructive behavior. Toxic positivity in a work environment that is permissive of a "fake spirit" culture inhibits healthy coping strategies, and exacerbates substance use as a form of escape (Holmes et al., 2025).

Wang et al. (2025) touched on a similar point in their study of the consumption of positive content (such as mukbang) on office social media, which appears to promote happiness but secretly creates pressure to appear cheerful. This creates unrealistic emotional standards in the workplace, and reinforces stigma against individuals with psychological distress. Happiness is made into a performance, rather than a valid emotional reality (X. Wang et al., 2025).

Finally, Kaptchuk et al. (2025) describe how social expectations of "vigorous recovery" among HIV-positive workers reinforce the notion that negative emotional expression is a form of weakness. This creates an internal pressure to continue to appear positive even when experiencing personal hardship, which has negative consequences for self-care and long-term work motivation (Kaptchuk et al., 2025).

Overall, all of this research suggests that toxic positivity is a real and complex phenomenon that not only impacts an individual's psychological well-being, but also impacts the dynamics of an organization as a whole. Excessive positivity — when not accompanied by empathy, space for expression, and acceptance of the reality of negative emotions — can actually become a dangerous form of collective denial. Toxic positivity erodes authentic communication, damages relationships between colleagues, and deepens emotional isolation. Therefore, approaches to mental health in the workplace must balance the drive for optimism with the recognition of the complexity of human emotions.

Discossion

The phenomenon of toxic positivity in the workplace is increasingly being discussed in various organizational discourses, especially in the context of corporate cultures that emphasize productivity and emotional resilience. This term refers to the excessive imposition of positive attitudes and the rejection of negative emotions that are actually valid in work dynamics (Wyatt, 2024). In many organizations, expressions such as "stay strong," "don't be emotional," or "just think positively" are often used not as a form of authentic emotional support, but as a mechanism to close off discussion about discomfort, stress, or inner conflict felt by employees. This leads to the formation of an emotionally unfriendly work environment, where complaints are seen as weaknesses, and expressions of negative emotions are seen as inhibiting performance (Huml et al., 2025).

A work culture that is oriented towards results and speed often encourages employees to appear strong and resilient in any situation, even when experiencing high mental pressure. This pressure does not always come from superiors, but can also come from social norms among coworkers. A survey by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2023) showed that 63% of employees felt compelled to "always appear happy" even when experiencing severe stress, and 47% of them admitted that this had an impact on decreasing work motivation. This confirms that toxic positivity is a new form of social pressure in the professional environment. A real case can be seen from the report of mass burnout experienced by health workers in various hospitals during the pandemic, where the expression "we must stay strong and smile" became the main narrative—but behind that, hundreds of medical workers applied for leave due to depression (Sutcliffe, 2025).

Repression of negative emotions not only has an impact on job satisfaction but also increases the risk of long-term psychological disorders. A study by Wang et al. (2025) found that the pressure to consistently display positive emotions in the work environment was significantly correlated with increased symptoms of anxiety disorders and difficulty sleeping (X. Wang et al., 2025). Those who experience toxic positivity tend to suppress inner conflicts without a healthy processing space, thus experiencing stress accumulation that leads to latent burnout. When self-expression is silenced, individuals lose the ability to regulate their emotions in a healthy way, which ultimately weakens mental resilience and makes individuals feel alienated in their own social environment (Doncliff, 2025).

The psychosocial impact of toxic positivity does not stop at the individual. This phenomenon also disrupts the social dynamics within the work team. Inauthentic communication and the dominance of "fake spirit" rhetoric cause relationships between employees to become shallow and full of pretense. In this context, genuine empathy is replaced by empty motivational comments that

essentially ignore a person's emotional reality. In a qualitative study by Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2025), it was found that 58% of respondents felt unheard when sharing their complaints in the work team because their colleagues only responded with the standard phrase "everything will be fine." This kind of response not only fails to solve the problem, but also erodes interpersonal trust.

This situation shows that toxic positivity can threaten the psychological resilience of the organization as a whole. When individuals do not feel emotionally safe to express their true feelings, the workspace loses its basic function as a community that supports mutual growth and learning. This becomes more evident in organizations that require high performance such as the financial and healthcare sectors. For example, in a report on burnout that occurred in the digital startup environment in Southeast Asia (Shopee and Gojek), many young employees felt forced to hide their exhaustion because the work culture implied that "passion is everything" (Gamble, 2025). Ironically, some of them then experienced symptoms of severe depression, and some chose to resign in a mentally unstable condition.

Building an emotionally healthy work culture is not enough just by providing mental health facilities, but also requires structural changes in organizational communication. One approach that is considered effective is empathy skills training for team leaders and managers so that they are able to provide validation-based responses when employees express difficulties. According to Doedens et al. (2025), organizations that implement regular emotional check-in sessions experience a decrease in burnout rates of up to 32% in six months. This shows that recognizing negative emotions as part of the work process actually increases the team's collective resilience, not weakens it.

Thus, toxic positivity is not just an inappropriate communication pattern, but a systemic manifestation of a work culture that is not yet fully emotionally inclusive. To create a truly healthy work environment, interventions are needed that include psychological education, restructuring of interpersonal communication, and organizational policies that open up space for authentic and humane emotional expression.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that toxic positivity is a form of hidden emotional pressure in the work environment that arises when individuals are forced to always be positive, even though they are experiencing real psychological pressure. Instead of increasing enthusiasm, this culture actually causes negative impacts such as chronic stress, burnout, anxiety, and interpersonal relationship disorders. Therefore, structural changes are needed in organizational communication so that the expression of negative emotions can be accepted as part of a healthy work dynamic.

Practices such as empathy training for managers, regular emotional discussion sessions, and education about the difference between healthy positive attitudes and toxic positivity can be concrete solutions. This study has limitations because it only uses secondary data, without exploring the direct experiences of workers in Indonesia. Therefore, further research is recommended using a mixed methods approach involving respondents from various sectors and cultural backgrounds, in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and impacts of toxic positivity in the world of work in a contextual and applicable manner.

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