

Work Attitude and Labour Productivity in the Textile and Garment Industry: A Critical Review from Vietnam

Nguyen Sinh Cong*

Binh Duong University, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9724-2449>

Nguyen Thi Hong Thuong

University of Transport Technology, Ha Noi, Vietnam

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5148-1794>

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Abstract: *Labour productivity remains a persistent challenge in labour-intensive manufacturing, particularly in emerging economies where competitiveness depends more on workforce performance than on capital-intensive technologies. This critical review examines the relationship between work attitudes and labour productivity, focusing on Vietnam's textile and garment industry. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, it synthesises research linking responsibility, engagement, discipline, cooperation and adaptability to productivity outcomes, including efficiency, effectiveness and output quality. The review interrogates how these constructs have been conceptualised and operationalised within labour-intensive contexts. Three limitations recur in the literature: reliance on cross-sectional surveys and self-reported productivity measures, uncritical application of exchange-based explanations, and insufficient attention to structural and institutional constraints such as wages, working conditions and labour turnover. The paper proposes a more integrated analytical perspective situating work attitudes within organisational and institutional contexts to better explain sustainable productivity outcomes.*

Keywords: work attitude; labour productivity; critical review; textile and garment industry; Vietnam; Social Exchange Theory

INTRODUCTION

Labour productivity has long been recognized as a cornerstone of economic growth, organisational competitiveness, and industrial sustainability (ILO, 2021). In labour-intensive manufacturing sectors such as the textile and garment industry, productivity outcomes depend less on capital-intensive technologies and more on the effective mobilization of human effort, coordination, and discipline (Better Work Viet Nam, 2024; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). Consequently, scholars and practitioners have devoted increasing attention to the role of employees' work attitudes in shaping productivity performance.

A substantial body of research suggests that positive work attitudes-including responsibility, engagement, discipline, cooperation, and adaptability-are associated with higher efficiency, improved output quality, and stronger organisational effectiveness (Tran et al., 2022; Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022). Nevertheless, this literature is marked by a strong tendency to treat work attitude as an individual-level psychological attribute that translates directly into productivity gains. Such an approach often overlooks the organisational, institutional, and labour-market contexts in which these attitudes are formed and expressed (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023).

These limitations are particularly evident in studies conducted in emerging economies. Research on labour-intensive industries frequently relies on cross-sectional survey designs and self-reported measures of productivity, yielding statistically significant correlations but limited causal insight (Nguyen & Giang, 2020; Tamrin & Hanoky, 2023). As several scholars have noted, productivity outcomes in manufacturing settings are shaped not only by worker attitudes but also by structural constraints such as wages, working hours, job insecurity, and occupational health conditions (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023).

Vietnam's textile and garment industry provides a salient illustration of these tensions. As one of the country's largest export-oriented sectors, it plays a critical role in employment creation and global value-chain integration (Better Work Viet Nam, 2024). At the same time, the industry is characterized by persistent challenges, including low wage levels, extensive overtime, high labour turnover, and physically demanding working conditions (Dang & Hoang, 2025; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). These conditions complicate the assumption, implicit in much of the literature, that positive work attitudes can be cultivated and sustained primarily through firm-level managerial interventions.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has emerged as the dominant framework for explaining how work attitudes influence productivity, positing that employees reciprocate favorable organisational treatment with positive attitudes and productive behaviours (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023). However, its application in labour-intensive industries warrants critical scrutiny. In contexts where workers face limited bargaining power and constrained

employment alternatives, discipline and compliance may reflect necessity rather than genuine reciprocity. This raises an important question that remains insufficiently examined in the existing literature: to what extent do observed “positive attitudes” represent authentic engagement rather than adaptive responses to structural vulnerability?

Against this backdrop, this study adopts a critical review approach to reassess the literature on work attitude and labour productivity, with particular emphasis on Vietnam’s textile and garment industry and comparable labour-intensive sectors in emerging economies. Rather than aggregating empirical findings, the review interrogates conceptualizations, theoretical assumptions, and methodological choices across existing studies. By identifying recurring limitations and underexplored tensions, the paper seeks to advance a more integrated and context-sensitive understanding of the attitude-productivity nexus.

CONCEPTUALIZING WORK ATTITUDE AND LABOUR PRODUCTIVITY: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Work Attitude as a Multidimensional Construct

The concept of work attitude has been widely employed across organisational behaviour, human resource management, and labour studies. Rather than representing a single disposition, work attitude is commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioural orientations toward work (Lohela-Karlsson et al., (2022). In manufacturing-oriented research, particularly within labour-intensive industries, scholars tend to operationalize work attitude through observable behavioural tendencies that are assumed to directly influence production outcomes.

Within this body of literature, five dimensions-responsibility, engagement, discipline, cooperation, and adaptability-recur with notable consistency and are frequently presented as universally desirable attributes conducive to productivity enhancement. Many studies implicitly assume that strengthening these attitudes will generate positive performance outcomes across organisational settings (Gomathy, 2022; Elamin et al., 2024). However, a critical reading reveals that such generalizations tend to abstract work attitudes from the structural conditions under which they are enacted. In labour-intensive industries characterized by rigid production regimes, standardized workflows, and limited worker autonomy, the productivity effects of these attitudinal dimensions are far from uniform. Evidence from the textile and garment sector suggests that constrained labour conditions-including low wages, extensive overtime, and strict supervisory control-may limit the extent to which responsibility, engagement, or adaptability reflect voluntary commitment rather than compliance or coping behaviour (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024). Consequently, treating these dimensions as context-independent drivers of productivity risks overstating their

explanatory power and obscuring the role of organisational and institutional constraints that shape how work attitudes are expressed and sustained.

Responsibility is commonly conceptualized as employees' sense of accountability, initiative, and willingness to assume ownership of work outcomes. Empirical studies in industrial and manufacturing contexts frequently report a positive association between responsibility and productivity-related indicators such as reduced error rates, adherence to production standards, and reliable task completion (Gazi et al., 2024; Llenado & Quines, 2022). However, a closer examination of how responsibility is operationalized reveals important conceptual and methodological limitations. In many survey-based studies, responsibility is measured primarily through self-reported compliance with rules, punctuality, or adherence to managerial expectations. Such indicators may capture conformity to normative or disciplinary requirements rather than the genuine internalization of accountability. In highly monitored and tightly controlled production environments-characteristic of labour-intensive industries such as textiles and garments-"responsible" behaviour may therefore be driven less by intrinsic motivation and more by external surveillance, performance pressure, or fear of sanctions (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). As a result, attributing productivity gains to responsibility without accounting for these control mechanisms is underestimating and conflating authentic attitudinal commitment with structurally induced compliance.

Engagement is commonly conceptualized as a positive and fulfilling work-related psychological state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, and it has become one of the most extensively examined attitudinal constructs in the literature on employee performance (Than et al., 2016; Gomathy, 2022). A substantial body of empirical research reports strong and statistically significant associations between engagement and productivity-related outcomes, including discretionary effort, task persistence, and reduced absenteeism (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). However, a critical strand of scholarship cautions that dominant engagement frameworks tend to individualize what are fundamentally structural phenomena. By emphasizing employees' psychological investment while downplaying material and institutional conditions, these frameworks risk treating engagement as a personal attribute rather than a contingent response to employment relations. In labour-intensive industries characterized by low wages, limited job security, and high labour turnover, disengagement may therefore constitute a rational and adaptive response to precarious working conditions rather than evidence of attitudinal deficiency or lack of commitment (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). Interpreting low engagement in such contexts as a managerial or motivational failure thus risks misdiagnosing structural constraints as individual shortcomings.

Discipline constitutes another work attitude dimension that is particularly emphasized in manufacturing and assembly-based production systems, where punctuality, rule compliance, and adherence to standardized procedures are central to maintaining production flow. Empirical studies in Southeast Asian manufacturing contexts consistently associate discipline

with workflow stability, reduced disruptions, and predictable output levels (Ichdan, 2024; Gomathy, 2022). However, a critical examination suggests that an excessive reliance on discipline-centered approaches may inadvertently strengthen hierarchical control mechanisms while constraining worker autonomy and discretion. In tightly managed production environments, discipline often functions less as a voluntary attitudinal orientation and more as an institutionalized form of behavioural regulation. From this perspective, equating discipline with productivity risks conflating efficiency with obedience, thereby obscuring important trade-offs between short-term output stabilization and long-term adaptive capacity, particularly in industries facing technological change and volatile market demands (Better Work Viet Nam, 2024; ILO, 2021).

Cooperation is commonly understood as encompassing teamwork, mutual support, and coordination among workers, particularly in production settings characterized by high task interdependence. In assembly-line systems, cooperative behaviour is widely regarded as essential for maintaining operational efficiency, synchronizing workflow, and minimizing production bottlenecks (Better Work Viet Nam, 2024). However, the existing literature rarely examines cooperation as a socially embedded and relational process shaped by leadership practices, power asymmetries, and organisational culture. Instead, cooperation is frequently conceptualized as an individual-level attitude or personal disposition, detached from the structural conditions under which collaboration emerges. Such an approach overlooks how managerial control, performance pressures, and competitive incentive systems may simultaneously demand cooperation while undermining trust and mutual support among workers (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). As a result, attributing productivity outcomes to cooperative attitudes alone risks obscuring the organisational and institutional arrangements that enable-or constrain-collective action in labour-intensive production environments.

Adaptability has emerged more recently as a focal dimension in the literature examining labour productivity under conditions of technological change, organisational restructuring, and market volatility. In labour-intensive manufacturing sectors, adaptable workers are commonly assumed to adjust more effectively to new production processes, evolving quality standards, and shifting organisational requirements, thereby supporting productivity continuity (Better Work Viet Nam, 2024; Nguyễn et al., 2025). However, a critical reading of this literature indicates a persistent tendency to individualize adaptability as a personal trait or attitudinal disposition. Such an approach pays insufficient attention to the organisational and institutional infrastructures that make adaptation possible, including access to training, opportunities for skill development, and supportive learning environments. In contexts where technological change is introduced without corresponding investments in workforce development, adaptability may function less as an endogenous capacity and more as a selective filter that disadvantages vulnerable workers (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). Framing adaptability as an individual productivity driver under these conditions threatens shifting responsibility for

adjustment onto workers while obscuring the structural supports required for sustainable adaptation.

Taken together, these conceptualizations reveal a common pattern: work attitude is predominantly framed as an individual-level attribute, with limited attention to the organisational and institutional contexts in which attitudes are formed and enacted. This tendency has significant implications for how productivity is understood and addressed in labour-intensive industries.

Conceptual Approaches to Labour Productivity

Labour productivity is typically defined as the efficiency with which labour inputs are transformed into outputs. In organisational-level studies, productivity is often operationalized through a combination of efficiency (output relative to time or effort), effectiveness (achievement of production targets), and quality of output (defect rates or compliance with standards). While these dimensions capture important aspects of performance, their conceptual and methodological treatment in the literature raises several concerns.

First, a substantial share of empirical studies relies on subjective, self-reported measures of labour productivity, particularly within survey-based research designs. While such measures offer practical advantages in large and dispersed manufacturing workforces, they are highly susceptible to common-method variance and social desirability bias. These risks are especially pronounced in labour-intensive settings where workers may perceive performance evaluation as implicitly connected to job security, income stability, or managerial scrutiny (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). Under such conditions, reported correlations between work attitude and productivity may reflect consistent self-presentation or shared perceptual frames rather than substantive relationships with objectively observed performance outcomes. Consequently, the strength of attitudinal effects reported in the literature may be overstated, calling into question the robustness of conclusions drawn from self-reported productivity data.

Second, much of the existing literature tends to conceptualize productivity indicators as neutral and technical outcomes, abstracted from the labour processes through which they are generated. In export-oriented industries such as textiles and garments, empirical evidence indicates that productivity improvements are frequently achieved through extended working hours, intensified labour effort, and increasingly stringent performance monitoring rather than through genuine efficiency gains (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). Studies that report elevated productivity levels without explicitly accounting for these labour process dynamics risk conflating efficiency with labour intensification. Such interpretations obscure critical questions regarding the sustainability of productivity improvements, particularly when short-term output gains are achieved at the expense of worker well-being, health, and long-term productive capacity.

Third, the literature exhibits a pronounced tendency to privilege output quality as a central indicator of productivity in garment manufacturing, reflecting the stringent compliance and quality standards imposed by global buyers within export-oriented value chains. While product quality is undeniably critical for market access and firm competitiveness, an exclusive emphasis on quality outcomes risks obscuring important trade-offs with worker well-being and long-term performance capacity. Evidence from labour-intensive manufacturing contexts indicates that sustained quality compliance is often achieved through heightened work intensity, prolonged working hours, and increased physical and psychological strain on workers (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). From a critical standpoint, productivity should therefore be conceptualized not merely as immediate output or quality performance, but as a dynamic and cumulative outcome shaped by working conditions, occupational health, and opportunities for skill development. Ignoring these dimensions may lead to inflated assessments of productivity that fail to account for its long-term social and organisational costs.

Implications for the Attitude–Productivity Nexus

When taken together, the dominant conceptual approaches to work attitude and labour productivity generate a simplified and linear narrative in which positive individual attitudes are presumed to translate directly into superior performance outcomes. Such a narrative, however, systematically underestimates the significance of structural constraints and power asymmetries that characterize labour-intensive industries. By locating both attitude formation and productivity outcomes primarily at the individual level, much of the existing literature overlooks the ways in which organisational control mechanisms, labour regulations, and market-driven production pressures condition-and often delimit-the extent to which attitudes can be expressed as productive behaviour (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024). As a result, productivity is frequently interpreted as an outcome of personal disposition rather than as a socially and institutionally mediated process embedded within unequal employment relations.

This conceptual gap highlights the need for a more integrated analytical perspective that situates work attitude within broader organisational and institutional contexts rather than treating it as an isolated individual-level factor. Such a perspective is critical for explaining why similar attitudinal profiles may generate divergent productivity outcomes across firms, production systems, and regulatory environments. It also helps account for the recurrent empirical finding that attitude-focused managerial interventions, when implemented in isolation from improvements in wages, working conditions, and skill development, frequently fail to deliver sustained productivity gains in labour-intensive industries (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024).

Against this conceptual backdrop, it becomes necessary to critically examine the theoretical frameworks that have been employed to explain the attitude-productivity relationship. In

particular, the predominance of Social Exchange Theory in the existing literature warrants closer scrutiny, not only in terms of its explanatory strengths but also its underlying assumptions and limitations when applied to labour-intensive industries characterized by asymmetric power relations and constrained employment conditions. The following section therefore reviews and critically assesses the role of Social Exchange Theory in shaping dominant interpretations of work attitude and labour productivity.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

Dominant Theoretical Approaches in the Literature

Research examining the relationship between work attitude and labour productivity has drawn on a range of theoretical perspectives, including motivation theory, job characteristics theory, organisational commitment theory, and human capital theory. Among these, Social Exchange Theory (SET) has emerged as the most frequently employed framework, particularly in studies focusing on employee attitudes and performance outcomes in organisational settings (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023).

Social Exchange Theory (SET) conceptualizes the employment relationship as a system of reciprocal exchanges between employees and employers, in which individuals respond to perceived organisational treatment with corresponding attitudes and behaviours. When employees believe that they receive fair treatment, adequate support, and appropriate rewards, SET predicts that they will reciprocate through positive work attitudes, compliance with organisational expectations, and enhanced productive behaviour (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023). This exchange-based logic possesses strong intuitive appeal and offers a parsimonious framework for explaining why attitudinal constructs such as engagement, responsibility, and cooperation are frequently found to correlate with productivity-related outcomes in organisational research.

Within labour-intensive manufacturing research, Social Exchange Theory is frequently invoked to justify the assumption that enhancements in organisational support, leadership practices, or working conditions will cultivate favorable work attitudes, which subsequently translate into improved productivity outcomes. This application has encouraged a strong focus on attitudinal mediators linking management practices to performance (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023). However, while SET provides a useful analytical point of departure, its widespread and often uncritical adoption in this literature raises important theoretical concerns. In particular, the theory's underlying assumptions regarding reciprocity, voluntarism, and balance in exchange relationships are rarely interrogated when applied to labour-intensive contexts characterized by constrained worker choice and unequal power relations.

Strengths of Social Exchange Theory in Explaining Work Attitudes

One of the central strengths of Social Exchange Theory lies in its emphasis on reciprocity and perceived fairness as core mechanisms shaping employee attitudes and behaviour. By foregrounding employees' subjective interpretations of organisational treatment, SET conceptualizes work attitudes as relational and dynamic responses rather than as stable personality traits. This perspective is consistent with empirical evidence demonstrating that engagement, cooperation, and discretionary effort are highly sensitive to managerial behaviour, leadership style, and perceptions of organisational justice (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023).

Within the productivity literature, SET offers a compelling explanation for why employees may exert effort beyond formal job requirements when they perceive organisational support, respect, and fair treatment. The theory provides a coherent conceptual bridge linking organisational practices-such as training provision, recognition systems, and communication quality-to attitudinal outcomes that are consequential for performance. In this regard, SET has played an important role in redirecting scholarly attention away from narrowly technical or mechanistic accounts of productivity toward more human-centered and relational explanations, thereby enriching the analytical toolkit available for studying labour productivity in organisational settings.

Limitations of Social Exchange Theory in Labour-Intensive Contexts

Despite its analytical strengths, the application of Social Exchange Theory in labour-intensive industries such as textiles and garments reveal several important conceptual limitations. First, SET implicitly assumes a degree of symmetry and voluntarism in exchange relationships, portraying employees as actors with meaningful discretion over whether and how they reciprocate organisational treatment. In labour markets characterized by surplus labour, low wage levels, and limited employment alternatives, this assumption becomes increasingly tenuous.

In Vietnam's garment industry and comparable production contexts, workers often operate under conditions of constrained bargaining power and heightened economic vulnerability. Under such circumstances, behaviours commonly interpreted as indicators of positive work attitudes-such as discipline, compliance, and sustained effort-may reflect necessity rather than genuine reciprocity. Compliance may arise not from perceived fairness in exchange, but from the immediate risks associated with noncompliance, including income loss or job termination. When applied without explicit attention to these power asymmetries, SET carries the risk of conflating coerced compliance with authentic attitudinal commitment, thereby overstating the voluntaristic basis of observed productive behaviour (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023).

Second, SET-based analyses tend to privilege individual perceptions while underplaying the constitutive role of structural and institutional conditions. Core elements of the employment relationship-such as wage levels, working hours, contract stability, and occupational safety-are frequently treated as contextual background rather than as integral components of the exchange itself. Consequently, studies grounded in SET often emphasize attitudinal mediators without critically interrogating whether the material conditions required for fair and sustainable exchange are actually in place (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024).

Third, much of the SET-informed literature assumes a linear and unidirectional relationship between work attitude and productivity, whereby positive attitudes are expected to generate higher performance outcomes. This assumption reinforces organisational investment in attitude-focused interventions while overlooking dynamic feedback effects and internal contradictions. In practice, productivity pressures may intensify work pace, extend overtime, and heighten monitoring, thereby undermining worker well-being and gradually eroding engagement and adaptability. Such recursive dynamics-where productivity demands reshape the very attitudes presumed to sustain them-are difficult to capture within a narrowly framed exchange perspective.

Beyond Social Exchange Theory: Toward an Integrated Perspective

In light of the limitations associated with the dominant application of Social Exchange Theory, an increasing number of scholars have called for greater theoretical pluralism in the study of work attitudes and labour productivity. Integrating insights from institutional theory, labour process theory, and political economy offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how work attitudes are shaped by broader systems of regulation, market competition, and power relations rather than by organisational exchange alone.

From an institutional perspective, national labour legislation, minimum wage policies, and the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms establish the baseline conditions under which employment exchanges occur. These institutional arrangements fundamentally influence whether reciprocity between employers and workers is feasible in practice or remains largely symbolic, particularly in labour-intensive industries operating under cost-competitive pressures (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024).

Labour process theory, in contrast, directs analytical attention to managerial control, work intensification, and the organization of production, emphasizing how productivity gains may be extracted independently of positive work attitudes. In tightly controlled production environments, output improvements may be achieved through intensified labour effort, extended working hours, or heightened monitoring, even in the absence of genuine engagement

or commitment. Such dynamics highlight the limitations of exchange-based explanations that equate productivity primarily with attitudinal alignment.

An integrated theoretical approach therefore repositions work attitude not as an autonomous driver of productivity, but as a mediating mechanism embedded within organisational and institutional structures. Within this framework, attitudinal constructs such as engagement and adaptability emerge as meaningful predictors of productivity only when supported by fair compensation, reasonable working hours, and sustained opportunities for skill development. In the absence of these enabling conditions, attitude-based explanations risk misattributing productivity challenges to individual deficiencies while obscuring the structural constraints that shape both worker behaviour and organisational performance.

Implications for Critical Review and Future Research

The predominance of Social Exchange Theory in the existing literature has generated valuable insights into the relational foundations of work attitudes and productivity, yet it has simultaneously narrowed the analytical lens through which this relationship is examined. A critical review of prior studies indicates that SET is frequently employed in a confirmatory rather than interrogative manner, with assumptions of reciprocity, fairness, and voluntarism largely taken for granted rather than empirically and contextually tested (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023). As a result, theoretical application often reinforces prevailing narratives about attitude-driven productivity while leaving underlying power relations and structural constraints insufficiently examined.

Future research would benefit from explicitly examining the boundary conditions under which SET provides valid explanatory leverage in labour-intensive industries. In particular, combining exchange-based explanations with structural and institutional analyses would allow scholars to move beyond descriptive correlations toward a more robust understanding of when, how, and for whom work attitudes translate into sustainable productivity outcomes. Such an integrative approach is especially critical in contexts characterized by precarious employment, cost-driven production regimes, and asymmetric employment relations, where the assumptions underpinning reciprocity cannot be presumed but must be empirically demonstrated.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON WORK ATTITUDE AND LABOUR PRODUCTIVITY: A CRITICAL SYNTHESIS

Building on the preceding conceptual and theoretical critique, this section does not treat empirical findings on work attitude and labour productivity as neutral or self-evident. Instead, it critically examines how dominant theoretical assumptions-particularly those derived from Social Exchange Theory-and prevailing methodological conventions shape reported empirical patterns (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023). By situating empirical results within their

conceptual, theoretical, and contextual foundations, this review evaluates whether observed associations reflect robust causal relationships or are partly artifacts of research design, measurement strategies, and managerial framings of productivity in labour-intensive industries (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; ILO, 2021).

General Empirical Patterns in the Literature

Across diverse national and industrial contexts, empirical studies tend to report positive associations between work attitude dimensions and labour productivity indicators (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tamrin & Hanoky, 2023). However, these regularities should not be interpreted at face value. A closer examination reveals that such findings are often produced within narrowly framed analytical models that prioritize individual-level explanations while marginalizing organisational control mechanisms and institutional constraints (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). Consequently, the apparent robustness of attitude-productivity linkages may reflect methodological convergence rather than theoretically grounded or contextually transferable causal relationships.

Within labour-intensive industries, engagement and adaptability are frequently identified as the most salient predictors of productivity-related outcomes. Empirical evidence suggests that adaptable workers are better equipped to respond to process adjustments, shifting quality standards, and production volatility, while engaged employees are more likely to contribute discretionary effort that supports workflow continuity and output consistency (Tran et al., 2022; Nguyễn et al., 2025). By contrast, responsibility and discipline tend to be more strongly associated with output stability and quality assurance rather than with direct gains in efficiency, reflecting their alignment with standardized production requirements.

However, despite the apparent regularity of positive associations, closer scrutiny reveals substantial variation in reported effect sizes, analytical specifications and contextual interpretations across studies (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). In some cases, engagement and adaptability demonstrate relatively stronger predictive power, whereas responsibility and discipline display weaker or statistically unstable effects once organisational or demographic controls are introduced (Nguyen & Giang, 2020; Nguyễn et al., 2025). Such heterogeneity suggests that the attitude - productivity relationship is unlikely to represent a uniform causal mechanism, but instead reflects conditional dynamics shaped by production regimes, managerial practices and institutional environments (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). This observation necessitates closer examination of model specification, interaction effects and boundary conditions within the empirical literature..

Methodological Homogeneity and Its Consequences

While the empirical literature consistently reports positive associations between work attitudes and labour productivity, the magnitude and stability of these relationships vary considerably across studies (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tamrin & Hanoky, 2023). Reported effect sizes range from modest correlations to substantively stronger regression coefficients, often depending on how attitudinal constructs and productivity indicators are operationalised (Tran et al., 2022; Nguyễn et al., 2025). In several cases, the inclusion of organisational or demographic control variables attenuates the apparent strength of individual attitude predictors, suggesting that part of the observed association may be attributable to contextual rather than purely psychological factors (Nguyen & Giang, 2020).

This heterogeneity raises important questions regarding the generalisability of findings. Rather than indicating a stable causal mechanism, variable effect sizes suggest that the productivity implications of work attitudes are contingent upon specific production regimes, managerial practices and institutional environments (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). For example, engagement appears to exhibit stronger predictive effects in firms characterised by supportive supervisory practices and skill development opportunities, whereas its impact is less pronounced in tightly controlled production systems with limited autonomy (Lim & Wang, 2025; Dang & Hoang, 2025). Such patterns indicate that work attitudes do not operate as universal productivity drivers, but as context-sensitive variables whose influence depends on enabling organisational conditions.

A related limitation concerns the relative neglect of interaction effects within empirical models. Many studies estimate additive relationships between individual attitudinal dimensions and productivity outcomes without systematically examining how these variables may interact with each other or with structural factors (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022). Yet theoretical reasoning grounded in Social Exchange Theory and related perspectives suggests that responsibility may enhance productivity only when accompanied by adequate skill resources and perceived fairness (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023). Similarly, adaptability may yield measurable gains primarily when supported by organisational learning infrastructures and training investment (Nguyễn et al., 2025; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024). The limited exploration of such interaction dynamics constrains the explanatory depth of existing research and reinforces simplified interpretations of linear causality.

Equally significant is the scarcity of longitudinal research designs. The overwhelming reliance on cross-sectional data in studies conducted across manufacturing settings, including Vietnam's garment industry, restricts the capacity to examine temporal sequencing and reciprocal effects (Nguyen & Giang, 2020; Tran et al., 2022). It remains unclear whether favourable work attitudes precede productivity gains, emerge as consequences of improved organisational performance, or evolve through iterative feedback processes over time. In

labour-intensive industries subject to fluctuating demand, restructuring pressures and technological change, attitudes and productivity are likely to co-evolve rather than follow a unidirectional trajectory (ILO, 2021; Dang & Hoang, 2025). Without longitudinal evidence, the durability and sustainability of reported productivity effects remain empirically underexamined.

Taken together, effect size heterogeneity, limited modelling of interaction mechanisms and the absence of temporal analysis suggest that the empirical literature provides qualified rather than definitive support for the attitude–productivity nexus. These methodological patterns do not invalidate existing findings; however, they underscore the need for more theoretically informed and contextually grounded research designs capable of identifying the conditions under which work attitudes meaningfully contribute to sustainable productivity outcomes.

Evidence from Emerging Economies and the Vietnamese Context

Empirical studies conducted in emerging economies, including Vietnam, largely replicate the positive associations between work attitudes and labour productivity reported in the international literature. Research focusing on manufacturing and garment workers frequently identifies engagement, discipline, and cooperation as significant predictors of performance-related outcomes and employee retention (Nguyen, 2025; Dang & Hoang, 2025). These findings are commonly interpreted as evidence that attitude-oriented human resource practices can enhance productivity even in resource-constrained environments.

Rather than viewing engagement, discipline, or cooperation as stable psychological traits, empirical evidence from Vietnam suggests that these attitudes often operate as situational and adaptive responses to precarious employment conditions (Dang & Hoang, 2025; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). In contexts characterized by low wages, extended overtime, and high labour turnover, expressions of positive work attitudes may reflect short-term coping strategies aimed at income security rather than durable forms of commitment or motivation (ILO, 2021). This interpretation challenges the tendency of existing studies to treat attitudinal measures as internally generated dispositions, independent of structural vulnerability and labour market insecurity.

Moreover, productivity indicators in garment manufacturing are deeply embedded within global value chain dynamics, including tight delivery schedules, buyer-driven compliance regimes, and stringent quality standards imposed by international brands. Studies that attribute productivity outcomes primarily to individual-level attitudes often fail to adequately account for these external production pressures, thereby overstating the explanatory power of attitudinal variables while underestimating the structural constraints shaping both worker behaviour and organisational performance.

Inconsistencies and Underexplored Tensions

Despite the overall tendency toward positive associations between work attitudes and labour productivity, the empirical literature exhibits notable inconsistencies that merit closer scrutiny. Several studies report weak or non-significant relationships between specific attitudinal dimensions-particularly cooperation and responsibility-and efficiency-oriented outcomes. Others suggest that high levels of discipline contribute primarily to output stability and quality control, without corresponding improvements in effectiveness or innovative capacity. These divergent findings complicate overly generalized claims regarding the productivity-enhancing effects of positive work attitudes.

Such inconsistencies indicate that the effects of work attitude are neither uniform nor unconditional, but rather contingent upon organisational practices, production regimes, and labour market conditions. For instance, cooperative behaviour may generate productivity benefits in team-based or interdependent production systems, while yielding limited returns in highly individualized or tightly controlled workflows. Similarly, responsibility and discipline may support compliance and consistency, yet offer diminishing marginal gains once basic performance thresholds are met. These divergent findings indicate that the effects of work attitude are neither uniform nor unconditional, but contingent upon organisational practices, production regimes, and labour market conditions (Dang & Hoang, 2025; Asia Garment Hub, 2023).

A further and largely underexamined tension concerns the sustainability of attitude-driven productivity gains. Empirical studies that emphasize short-term improvements in output or quality rarely extend their analysis to longer-term outcomes such as worker health, skill accumulation, or labour turnover. Consequently, the literature provides limited insight into whether productivity gains associated with favorable work attitudes can be sustained over time in the absence of improvements in underlying structural conditions. From a critical perspective, this gap raises important questions about the long-term viability of productivity strategies that rely predominantly on attitudinal alignment rather than systemic change.

Implications of the Empirical Evidence for a Critical Perspective

Taken together, the empirical literature provides qualified support for the general proposition that work attitudes are associated with labour productivity, while simultaneously exposing substantial limitations in how this relationship has been examined and interpreted. The dominance of cross-sectional research designs, the widespread reliance on subjective productivity measures, and the frequent application of context-insensitive analytical frameworks constrain the capacity of existing studies to generate robust and causally persuasive explanations (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022; Nguyễn et al., 2025).

From a critical standpoint, much of the empirical literature tends to individualize productivity challenges by locating their primary determinants in workers' attitudes rather than in organisational practices or institutional arrangements. This analytical orientation closely aligns with managerial perspectives emphasizing attitudinal alignment and behavioural compliance, yet it risks obscuring the structural conditions—such as wage levels, working hours, employment security, and regulatory enforcement—that shape both employee attitudes and performance outcomes (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). Consequently, empirical findings should be interpreted with caution, particularly when they are mobilized to justify attitude-focused interventions in the absence of corresponding improvements in material working conditions or job security.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Rethinking the Attitude-Productivity Relationship

The critical synthesis of conceptual, theoretical, and empirical studies indicates that the relationship between work attitude and labour productivity is considerably more complex than is commonly portrayed in the existing literature. Although positive associations are reported with notable consistency, these findings often rest on simplified assumptions concerning individual agency, reciprocity, and managerial control (Colquitt et al., 2013; Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022). In particular, the prevailing tendency to frame work attitude as an autonomous, individual-level determinant of productivity threatens to obscure the structural and institutional conditions under which attitudes are formed, expressed, and translated into work behaviour (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023).

A more nuanced interpretation therefore requires reconceptualizing work attitude not as a direct causal driver of productivity, but as a mediating mechanism embedded within organisational and institutional contexts. From this perspective, attitudinal constructs such as engagement, responsibility, and adaptability do not generate productivity gains automatically or uniformly. Instead, their effects are contingent upon the quality of employment relations, the organization of work processes, and the broader labour market and regulatory environments in which production takes place (Dang & Hoang, 2025; Asia Garment Hub, 2023). This shift in analytical focus is essential for moving beyond descriptive correlations toward more explanatory and context-sensitive models of labour productivity.

An Integrated Analytical Framework

Building on the conceptual and empirical limitations identified in the existing literature, this review advances an integrated analytical framework that positions work attitude at the intersection of individual, organisational, and institutional dynamics. Rather than treating

attitude as an isolated psychological driver, the framework emphasizes its embeddedness within multilayered employment contexts that jointly shape productivity outcomes.

At the individual level, work attitudes represent workers' cognitive and affective responses to their employment conditions, influenced by personal expectations, prior work experiences, and perceptions of fairness and reciprocity (Colquitt et al., 2013). However, these responses are neither fixed nor autonomous. Empirical evidence suggests that attitudes evolve over time in relation to organisational practices and external constraints, particularly in labour-intensive settings characterized by limited bargaining power and employment insecurity (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2024; Dang & Hoang, 2025).

At the organisational level, managerial practices-including compensation systems, training provision, leadership styles, work scheduling, and performance monitoring-play a decisive role in shaping both work attitudes and productivity outcomes. Engagement and adaptability, for example, are more likely to translate into productivity gains in organizations that invest in skill development, provide reasonable autonomy, and foster supportive supervisory relations, rather than relying predominantly on discipline, surveillance, and hierarchical control (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022).

At the institutional level, labour regulations, minimum wage policies, enforcement mechanisms, and global value-chain pressures establish the structural boundaries within which organisational exchanges take place. In labour-intensive industries such as textiles and garments, institutional weaknesses-including weak enforcement of labour standards and intense cost competition-may constrain the feasibility of fair exchange relationships, thereby limiting the capacity of positive work attitudes to generate sustainable productivity improvements (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024).

Within this integrated framework, work attitude functions as a conditional mediator rather than a universal solution to productivity challenges. Productivity gains emerge not from attitude enhancement alone, but from the alignment between individual dispositions, organisational practices, and institutional supports. Absent such alignment, attitude-focused interventions risk producing short-term compliance rather than durable improvements in productivity and workforce sustainability.

Implications for Future Research

The adoption of an integrated analytical framework carries several important implications for future research on work attitude and labour productivity. First, there is a clear need to broaden methodological approaches beyond the prevailing reliance on cross-sectional survey designs. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies would provide deeper insight into how work attitudes and productivity co-evolve over time, particularly in response to changes in working

conditions, management practices, or regulatory environments. Such designs are better suited to addressing longstanding questions of causality and reciprocal influence that remain unresolved in much of the existing literature (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022).

Second, future studies should prioritize the use of objective or multi-source productivity measures wherever feasible. Complementing self-reported assessments with production records, quality indicators, or supervisory evaluations would help mitigate common-method bias and enhance the empirical credibility of findings. This methodological shift is especially important in labour-intensive industries, where self-reported productivity may be strongly shaped by perceived job insecurity and evaluative pressures (Asia Garment Hub, 2023; Dang & Hoang, 2025).

Third, greater analytical attention should be paid to contextual heterogeneity. Comparative research across firms, regions, and regulatory environments can illuminate how institutional arrangements condition the relationship between work attitude and productivity. In the Vietnamese context, for instance, variations in firm ownership structures, levels of compliance with labour standards, and degrees of integration into global value chains may generate divergent attitudinal and productivity outcomes even within the same industry (ILO, 2021; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024).

Finally, future research would benefit from a more pluralistic theoretical orientation. Rather than relying predominantly on Social Exchange Theory, scholars are encouraged to integrate insights from institutional theory, labour process theory, and political economy. Such theoretical integration enables a more critical examination not only of how work attitudes influence productivity, but also of whose interests are advanced by prevailing productivity regimes and at what social and human cost. This shift is essential for advancing explanations that move beyond attitudinal correlation toward a deeper understanding of power, regulation, and sustainability in labour-intensive production systems.

Implications for Management and Policy

From a practical perspective, the critical insights generated by this review caution against narrowly conceived, attitude-centered productivity interventions. Managerial strategies that prioritize discipline, compliance, or behavioural alignment-while leaving wages, working hours, job security, and career development largely unaddressed-may deliver short-term output stability, but they are unlikely to sustain productivity growth over time. Empirical and industry evidence suggests that such approaches often rely on labour intensification rather than genuine performance enhancement, thereby increasing the risk of worker fatigue, turnover, and declining engagement (Asia Garment Hub, 2023; Dang & Hoang, 2025).

In contrast, productivity strategies grounded in investments in training, fair and predictable compensation, and participatory management practices are more likely to foster engagement and adaptability in ways that support long-term organisational performance. Where workers perceive opportunities for skill development, voice, and advancement, positive work attitudes are more likely to translate into discretionary effort and sustained productivity gains rather than mere compliance (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022).

For policymakers, the findings underscore the central role of labour institutions in shaping the conditions under which work attitudes influence productivity. Strengthening the enforcement of labour standards, improving minimum wage policies, and supporting workforce skill development systems are essential for ensuring that positive work attitudes function as genuine drivers of productivity rather than adaptive responses to precarious employment. In labour-intensive industries such as textiles and garments, institutional interventions that enhance employment security and regulatory compliance can help align productivity objectives with broader goals of decent work and sustainable industrial development (ILO, 2021; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024).

Limitations of the Review

This critical review is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, although it draws on a broad range of international and Vietnamese studies, it does not adopt a formal systematic review protocol with predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The selection of literature was guided primarily by thematic relevance and theoretical contribution rather than by exhaustive database search procedures. As a result, some relevant empirical studies may not have been incorporated.

Second, the review places particular emphasis on labour-intensive manufacturing, with a focused discussion of Vietnam's textile and garment industry. While this contextual anchoring strengthens analytical depth, it may limit the direct generalisability of the conclusions to other sectors characterised by different technological intensity, regulatory environments or labour market structures.

Third, the analysis relies on secondary data and published findings, which themselves are shaped by prevailing methodological conventions within the field. Consequently, some of the identified limitations-such as the predominance of cross-sectional designs or simplified modelling strategies-reflect structural patterns in the literature rather than deficiencies attributable to individual studies. The review therefore evaluates existing evidence within the constraints of available research designs.

Finally, as a theoretically oriented synthesis, the review advances an integrated analytical framework without empirically testing it. Future research employing longitudinal, multi-source

and comparative designs is required to assess the explanatory validity of the proposed perspective across diverse institutional contexts.

Acknowledging these limitations does not diminish the contribution of the review; rather, it clarifies its scope and delineates directions for further scholarly inquiry.

CONCLUSION

This critical review set out to reassess the widely accepted proposition that positive work attitudes function as reliable drivers of labour productivity in labour-intensive manufacturing contexts. While the existing literature overwhelmingly reports positive associations between attitudinal dimensions—such as responsibility, engagement, discipline, cooperation, and adaptability—and productivity outcomes, this review demonstrates that such conclusions are frequently grounded in simplified conceptual assumptions and methodologically narrow research designs. By interrogating how work attitude and labour productivity have been theorized, operationalized, and empirically linked, the analysis reveals a persistent tendency to individualize productivity performance while marginalizing the structural and institutional conditions under which work is organized (ILO, 2021; Asia Garment Hub, 2023).

The review makes three key contributions to the literature. Conceptually, it reframes work attitude as a context-dependent and conditional mediator rather than an autonomous driver of productivity, emphasizing that attitudinal expressions are shaped by employment relations and labour market constraints. Theoretically, it questions the uncritical dominance of Social Exchange Theory by highlighting its limitations in labour-intensive contexts characterized by asymmetric power relations and constrained worker choice (Colquitt et al., 2013; Ahmad et al., 2023). Empirically, by situating evidence from Vietnam's textile and garment industry within broader organisational and institutional dynamics, the review cautions against decontextualized interpretations of attitude–productivity linkages that overlook wages, working conditions, job security, and labour turnover (Better Work Viet Nam, 2024; Asia Garment Hub, 2023).

Taken together, the findings suggest that positive work attitudes do not automatically translate into sustainable productivity gains. In labour-intensive industries operating under cost pressures and regulatory constraints, attitudinal expressions may function as adaptive responses to precarity rather than as reliable levers for long-term performance improvement. Productivity gains achieved primarily through intensified labour effort, extended working hours, or heightened monitoring risk being short-lived and may undermine worker well-being, engagement, and future productive capacity (ILO, 2021).

From a practical perspective, the review cautions against narrowly conceived, attitude-centered managerial interventions. Strategies that prioritize discipline or behavioural compliance

without corresponding improvements in compensation, working conditions, and skill development are unlikely to sustain productivity growth over time. Instead, productivity-enhancing strategies should be grounded in investments in workforce capabilities, fair and predictable employment relations, and participatory management practices that enable positive work attitudes to translate into discretionary effort and adaptive capacity (Lohela-Karlsson et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2022).

For policymakers, the analysis underscores the central role of labour institutions in shaping the conditions under which work attitudes influence productivity. Strengthening labour regulation enforcement, improving minimum wage policies, and supporting systems of vocational training and skill upgrading are essential for aligning productivity objectives with broader goals of decent work and sustainable industrial development. In labour-intensive sectors such as textiles and garments, institutional interventions remain critical for ensuring that productivity improvements are socially sustainable rather than achieved at the expense of worker security and well-being (ILO, 2021; Better Work Viet Nam, 2024).

Overall, this review argues that while work attitude remains a relevant analytical lens, its explanatory value is fundamentally contingent on context. Advancing credible and sustainable productivity strategies in Vietnam's textile and garment industry-and in comparable labour-intensive sectors in emerging economies-requires moving beyond isolated attitudinal explanations toward integrated approaches that recognize the interplay between individual dispositions, organisational practices, and institutional constraints.

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