



When Staying Becomes Survival: Coping, Endurance, and Self-Preservation in Nepotistic Organisations

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Research on organisational nepotism has mainly examined its consequences for fairness perceptions, organisational climate, employee silence, withdrawal, commitment, and turnover intention. Less is known about how employees continue to function when they remain in organisational environments they perceive as nepotistic. This study explores how non-family employees cope with, endure, and protect themselves under continued exposure to perceived organisational nepotism. An interpretivist qualitative design guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight non-family employees from three family-owned organisations in Malaysia's oil and gas industry, and the data were analysed idiographically before cross-case patterns were examined. The findings show that remaining in a perceived nepotistic organisation should not be read automatically as acceptance or continued commitment. Participants' accounts indicate an evolving process in which employees normalise prolonged unfairness, manage expectations, distance themselves psychologically, preserve professional integrity, draw on trusted relationships, and assess exit readiness when the personal or professional cost of staying becomes too high. Drawing on Conservation of Resources Theory as an interpretive lens, the article conceptualises self-preservation as a resource-conservation process through which employees attempt to protect psychological, professional, relational, and future career resources under persistent perceived unfairness. The study contributes to organisational nepotism research by shifting attention from employee outcomes alone to the lived process through which employees remain, adapt, and protect themselves while recognising exit as a possible survival response.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Organisational nepotism refers to preferential treatment grounded in kinship or familial relationships within employment and organisational decision-making. Although it may appear as an ordinary feature of family-owned organisational life, recent scholarship shows that nepotism has wider implications for how employees interpret fairness, opportunity, recognition, and their own place within the organisation (Burhan et al., 2020; Schilpzand et al., 2025). From the position of employees who do not benefit from familial ties, nepotistic arrangements may signal that access to influence and advancement is shaped less by contribution than by relational proximity.

Existing research has established that perceived nepotism is associated with adverse employee and organisational

outcomes. Studies have linked nepotism and favouritism with organisational climate concerns, reduced trust and commitment, fear-based silence, workplace withdrawal, lower career satisfaction, psychological contract violation, weakened psychological attachment, and turnover intention (Vveinhardt & Bendaraviciene, 2022; Jain et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2023; Shatila et al., 2024). More recent work further suggests that supervisor nepotism can threaten workplace dignity and perceived insider status while heightening identity threat, thereby contributing to psychological withdrawal as a possible self-preservation response (Salem et al., 2026).

However, knowing that nepotism is associated with silence, withdrawal, or turnover intention does not fully explain how employees live through the condition while they remain employed. Continued employment should not be interpreted

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automatically as acceptance, adaptation, or organisational commitment. Employees may remain because immediate exit is constrained by financial responsibilities, career considerations, professional identity, family obligations, peer relationships, or limited alternatives, while simultaneously reducing emotional investment and distancing themselves from organisational life.

This distinction is important for family-owned organisations, where familial influence, hierarchy, employment dependency, and informal power may intersect. Employees who perceive nepotism may not view direct challenge as viable, but neither do they necessarily accept the condition as legitimate. Their responses may therefore involve coping with the immediate experience, enduring its persistence, and protecting the self psychologically and professionally. These responses are better understood as connected aspects of an evolving lived process than as isolated outcomes.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how employees make sense of coping, endurance, and self-preservation under perceived organisational nepotism. It focuses on non-family employees from three family-owned organisations in Malaysia's oil and gas industry. The study does not seek to establish whether nepotism objectively occurred within the participating organisations; rather, it examines employees' lived experiences of organisational practices they perceived as nepotistic.

Guided by IPA, the study asks: RQ1: How do employees cope with and endure perceived organisational nepotism? RQ2: How do employees experience and make sense of self-preservation, including exit readiness, in response to continued exposure to perceived organisational nepotism?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Organisational Nepotism and Employee Responses

Nepotism is specifically anchored in familial or kinship ties and should be distinguished from broader forms of favouritism that may arise from friendship, political affiliation, social networks, or other interpersonal relationships (Schilpzand et al., 2025). This distinction matters because family relationships may be embedded within formal authority structures, ownership, promotion, and employment decisions. Non-beneficiary employees may therefore interpret nepotism not only as a single unfair decision but as an organisational condition shaping what effort, competence, and loyalty are likely to produce.

Recent studies provide strong evidence that perceived nepotism affects employee responses. Jain et al. (2022) found that nepotism was positively associated with fear-based silence and workplace withdrawal and negatively associated with career satisfaction. Lim et al. (2023) showed that nepotism can undermine workplace commitment through psychological contract violation, reflected in reduced psychological attachment and increased turnover intention. Shatila et al. (2024) similarly linked nepotism in Middle Eastern family firms with turnover intention through commitment, engagement, and job satisfaction. These studies establish important consequences, but they remain largely outcome-oriented.

A process-focused perspective is therefore needed. Employees may continue working while becoming less attached, less willing to speak, or more psychologically distant. The central issue is not only whether nepotism produces negative outcomes, but how employees interpret remaining within a condition they perceive as persistent and difficult to change.

2.2 Coping and Endurance

Coping refers to the ways individuals manage demands they perceive as stressful, threatening, or difficult to control. In organisational settings, coping may include problem-focused responses, emotional regulation, avoidance, silence, distancing, support seeking, or selective disengagement. Recent work on workplace ostracism emphasises that coping develops over time as employees recognise adverse experiences, assess their consequences, evaluate available resources, select coping responses, and reassess whether those responses remain effective (Sharma & Dhar, 2024). This process view is useful for understanding nepotism because perceived nepotistic conditions may persist rather than appear as discrete events that can be resolved quickly.

Research on favouritism also shows that individuals do not simply accept or reject preferential practices. Hotho et al. (2020) found that managers exposed to communal expectations of favouritism adopted different coping strategies in recruitment and selection. Although their study focused on managers who handled favouritism-related pressure rather than non-beneficiary employees, it demonstrates that responses to preferential relationships are shaped by social position, perceived influence, and the available room for action.

For non-family employees who perceive nepotism, coping may gradually become endurance when the condition remains present and difficult to influence. Endurance should not be romanticised as resilience or treated as evidence of organisational commitment. Cham et al. (2021) conceptualise endurance as sustaining functioning over time under demanding conditions, while job embeddedness research shows that employees may remain because leaving would require relinquishing valued work-related resources (Peltokorpi & Allen, 2024; Moon et al., 2026). In this study, endurance refers to the lived experience of continuing to function while managing the psychological and professional cost of remaining.

2.3 Self-Preservation, Withdrawal and Exit

When coping and endurance no longer sufficiently protect employees from adverse organisational experiences, responses may become oriented more explicitly towards self-preservation. Self-preservation does not necessarily mean immediate resignation. It may first appear through silence, psychological distancing, reduced emotional investment, selective disengagement, or withdrawal from organisational life. From this perspective, withdrawal is not only a negative employee outcome; it may also be an attempt to protect the self when employees perceive limited capacity to change the source of adversity.

This interpretation is supported by emerging nepotism research. Jain et al. (2022) linked perceived nepotism with fear-based silence and workplace withdrawal, suggesting that employees may reduce voice and engagement when speaking or acting is perceived as risky. Selem et al. (2026) moved closer to an explicit self-preservation account by showing that

supervisor nepotism weakened workplace dignity and perceived insider status, heightened identity threat, and contributed to psychological withdrawal among restaurant employees. Their study frames withdrawal as a way employees protect valued psychological resources when these are threatened by nepotistic supervision.

Exit intention may represent a further form of self-protective reassessment. Lim et al. (2023) found that perceived nepotism increased turnover intention through psychological contract violation, while Shatila et al. (2024) connected nepotism in family firms with turnover intention through employee commitment, engagement, and job satisfaction. Yet turnover intention and actual exit are not equivalent. Employees may consider leaving while remaining because exit carries financial, occupational, relational, or personal costs. The present study therefore treats exit intention and exit readiness as part of a broader self-preservation process rather than as a simple endpoint.

2.4 Theoretical Perspective

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory provides the interpretive lens for this article. COR theory proposes that individuals seek to acquire, retain, protect, and conserve resources they value, including psychological, social, relational, and work-related resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). This perspective is relevant because employees who perceive nepotism may experience threats not only to material rewards but also to recognition, dignity, career prospects, belonging, fairness expectations, and confidence that organisational effort will produce valued returns.

COR theory helps explain why apparently passive responses may serve a protective function. Silence, reduced emotional investment, psychological distancing, or exit consideration may appear undesirable from an organisational performance perspective. From a resource-conservation perspective, however, such responses may represent attempts to prevent further psychological expenditure when employees perceive that challenging nepotistic conditions is unlikely to produce meaningful change.

The theoretical role of COR is deliberately separated from the methodological role of IPA. COR was not used as an a priori coding framework, nor does this study assume a fixed sequence from coping to endurance, withdrawal, and exit. IPA remains the methodological basis for examining participants' meaning-making, while COR subsequently provides a vocabulary for interpreting how participants' accounts reflect resource investment, depletion, conservation, and protection. The contribution therefore lies in using COR to illuminate the lived process of self-preservation under perceived organisational nepotism, rather than in introducing COR to nepotism research for the first time.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and guided by IPA. The approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand how employees experience and make sense of coping, endurance, and self-preservation in organisational environments they perceive as nepotistic, rather than to quantify

predetermined relationships among these phenomena. IPA is suitable for research concerned with complex and personally significant experiences because it enables detailed examination of how individuals interpret events within particular social and organisational contexts (Smith et al., 2022).

Consistent with IPA, the study prioritised participants' subjective accounts while recognising the interpretative role of the researcher in making sense of those accounts. Each participant's account was examined in detail before patterns of convergence and divergence were considered across cases. This protected the idiographic orientation of the study and reduced the risk of allowing the article's conceptual focus on coping, endurance, and self-preservation to predetermine the analysis.

3.2 Participants and Data Collection

The study was situated within Malaysia's oil and gas industry and involved employees from three family-owned organisations operating within the sector. The context was relevant because family relationships may intersect with organisational authority, employment practices, and informal influence, creating circumstances in which non-family employees may perceive preferential treatment. The study did not seek to establish whether nepotism objectively occurred within the participating organisations; it examined employees' lived experiences of practices they perceived as nepotistic.

Eight non-family employees participated in the study. The sample comprised three participants from Organisation A, two from Organisation B, and three from Organisation C. Participants were selected purposively because they were able to provide detailed first-hand accounts of working in organisational environments where they perceived nepotistic practices to be present. All participants had at least one year of organisational tenure, providing sufficient exposure to the organisational environment and employment practices relevant to the study. The sample size of eight participants was appropriate for IPA because the study prioritised detailed idiographic engagement with each participant's lived experience before developing cross-case interpretations. This allowed sufficient depth of analysis while still enabling comparison of convergence and divergence across participants. All participant and organisation identifiers were pseudonymised to protect confidentiality.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 to 90 minutes. The interview questions were open-ended and encouraged participants to describe their workplace experiences, how they perceived and responded to preferential treatment associated with familial relationships, and how they managed continued employment within the organisation. Follow-up prompts were used to clarify meanings and encourage elaboration. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interview guide was prepared in both English and Bahasa Melayu to support participants' understanding, while the interviews were conducted primarily in English with occasional Malay expressions or terms of address used naturally by participants. These expressions were retained where necessary to preserve participants' meanings. The reported extracts were checked against the transcripts to ensure that participants' intended meanings were accurately represented.

Participants were recruited purposively through the researcher's professional access to employees with relevant

experience in family-owned oil and gas organisations. Potential participants were approached because they were able to provide first-hand accounts of perceived nepotism and its effects on coping, endurance, and self-preservation.

3.3 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using the six-stage process of IPA described by Smith et al. (2022). Analysis began with repeated reading of each transcript to develop familiarity with each participant's account and experiential context. Exploratory noting then engaged with descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of the account, enabling the analysis to move from participants' explicit descriptions towards a more interpretative understanding of how they made sense of perceived organisational nepotism.

Experiential statements were developed from the exploratory notes and examined for meaningful connections within each case. Related statements were clustered to construct personal experiential themes that reflected significant patterns in the participant's account. Each case was analysed on its own terms before the next case was considered. This case-by-case procedure was important because it prevented themes identified in earlier accounts from prematurely determining the interpretation of later accounts.

After individual case analyses were completed, personal experiential themes were examined across participants to identify convergence and divergence. For this article, analytical attention was directed specifically towards experiential material concerning how participants coped with adverse conditions, endured them, protected themselves psychologically and professionally, and considered the limits of remaining. Coping, endurance, self-preservation, withdrawal, and exit were not coded as predetermined stages or treated as a fixed sequence. Their relationships were interpreted from participants' accounts and the experiential patterns generated through IPA.

3.4 Research Rigour and Ethics

Methodological rigour was supported through IPA's idiographic discipline, transparent movement from transcript engagement to experiential statements and personal experiential themes, and careful cross-case interpretation. The analysis retained attention to both convergence and divergence so that shared patterns did not erase meaningful individual differences. The use of participant identifiers and a participant profile table also supports transparency while preserving confidentiality.

The researcher's interpretative role was treated as part of the analytic process rather than as a neutral absence from it. Reflexive attention was required because IPA involves a double hermeneutic: participants made sense of their experiences, and the researcher made sense of those accounts. During analysis, the researcher returned repeatedly to the transcripts, examined participant accounts case by case, and considered convergence and divergence before developing cross-case interpretations.

This study was undertaken as part of a doctoral research project at Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNIRAZAK). At the time the research was conducted, separate institutional ethics committee approval was not required for this category of non-clinical interview-based doctoral research under the applicable university postgraduate research procedures. Approval to conduct the doctoral research was obtained through the university's postgraduate research process. Participation was

voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before the interviews. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study, and the measures adopted to protect confidentiality. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription and reporting, and the participating organisations were anonymised as Organisations A, B and C.

Rigour was further supported by checking reported extracts against the transcripts, preserving participant identifiers in the findings, and presenting divergent as well as convergent accounts. This allowed readers to see how interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts without treating cross-case patterns as uniform experiences.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Participant	Organisation	Gender	Age	Position/Role	Years of Service
P1	Organisation A	Male	45	Master	18
P2	Organisation A	Male	47	Operation Manager	12
P3	Organisation A	Female	30	Superintendent	8
P4	Organisation B	Female	37	Senior Executive	15
P5	Organisation B	Male	38	Chief Officer	15
P6	Organisation C	Male	31	HSE Manager	7
P7	Organisation C	Female	36	Account Officer	10
P8	Organisation C	Female	35	Admin Officer	7

Note. Participant and organisation identifiers are pseudonymous to preserve confidentiality.

4. FINDINGS

Analysis of participants' accounts revealed that coping with perceived organisational nepotism was not experienced simply as a choice between confronting unfairness and leaving the organisation. Participants described different ways of remaining functional while attempting to limit the psychological and professional costs associated with conditions they felt they had limited capacity to change. Across the accounts, endurance, emotional distancing, protective responsibility, informal support, and exit readiness were interconnected, although they did not occur in a uniform sequence. The findings move from participant extract to close interpretative reading, then to cross-case convergence and divergence before drawing an interpretative synthesis.

4.1 Endurance Through Normalisation

For several participants, endurance began with recognising that perceived nepotism had become embedded in everyday organisational life. P7 described this not as a temporary difficulty but as a condition that senior figures appeared to notice without materially changing:

"Yes, they noticed that it has been prolonged, Puan, and it has become the norm already. We all got used to the situation already" (P7)

P7's account positions nepotism as a normalised organisational condition rather than an isolated managerial problem. The repeated sense that the situation remained unchanged, despite being noticed, helps explain why endurance became part of everyday working life. The retained Malay expressions, including "Puan" as a respectful form of address, preserve the participant's meaning while showing how the experience was narrated in her own language practice.

P6's account converged with P7's sense of constraint, but his endurance was framed more explicitly through family responsibility and geographical disruption:

"I have to go through this, furthermore, my company has shifted from KL to JB. I have family, so I stay and go with the flow." (P6)

Here, staying was not presented as approval of the situation. The phrase "go with the flow" carried the weight of practical obligation: moving location, maintaining work, and protecting family stability. Through a COR lens, P6's account suggests that remaining became a way of preventing further resource loss even while the workplace itself was experienced as depleting.

P2 offered a partly divergent account because he named his response as a form of acceptance, while still retaining anger when he saw others affected:

"When I first saw it, of course that is not fair, and it should not be. But over time...acceptance come. But when I saw that things happened to someone else which deserve the promotion not happen and the management overlook or just ignore, I got angry." (P2)

P2's use of "acceptance" should not be read as moral endorsement. It functioned more as reluctant accommodation to a condition he had learned to expect. The divergence lies in how anger reappeared when unfairness affected others. Across P7, P6, and P2, endurance therefore involved different forms of adjustment: early recognition of organisational norms, pragmatic staying for family stability, and reluctant acceptance interrupted by moral anger. The synthesis is that staying became a constrained practice of living with what participants felt unable to change, rather than evidence that nepotism had become acceptable.

4.2 Coping Through Emotional and Psychological Distancing

A second experiential pattern concerned how participants reduced emotional exposure while continuing to perform their roles. For P6, distancing became a deliberate narrowing of contact and attention:

"I just calm down myself. I always remind myself to limit my conversation with my supervisor, just do my work, finish and go back." (P6)

The repeated movement from calming himself to limiting conversation and returning home suggests an effort to control the boundaries of exposure. P6 did not describe disengaging from work itself; rather, he attempted to reduce the interpersonal contact that he associated with harm. Distancing therefore functioned as a way of conserving emotional energy.

P5 described a similar narrowing of involvement, but his account introduced an important professional boundary:

"I rather keep quiet and mind my own business. But I can't run away, when it comes to safety I will now just go to master and report to master for his action." (P5)

P5's distancing was selective. He withdrew from unnecessary involvement, but safety remained non-negotiable. This convergence with P6 is therefore not simple withdrawal. Both men reduced emotional or relational exposure, but P5's account shows that self-protection could coexist with professional accountability.

P4's account offered a quieter version of the same process from a less powerful organisational position:

"With my position, it is a bit limited for me. So, what can I do, just do my job and...be positive and always give the best to my manager and department. If I am angry, I keep quiet a while, let it release a bit...then I back to normal." (P4)

P4 did not frame distancing as authority or resistance; she framed it through limited position, emotional containment, and continued contribution to her department. Compared with P5, whose boundary was tied to safety authority, P4's response was more relational and supportive. Across these accounts, emotional distancing appears not as apathy but as resource conservation: participants protected their remaining psychological capacity while continuing to fulfil duties they still regarded as meaningful.

4.3 Protecting the Self and Others

The third pattern shows that self-preservation was not always passive or individualistic. Some participants protected professional principles, team members, or valued relationships while remaining in the organisation. P1, who held a safety-critical role, expressed this through firm professional authority:

"No. I will use my jurisdiction and authority as a master to STOP WORK POLICY...I am master and I know what the best for my vessel and my crews" (P1)

P1's account shows resistance grounded in role identity. His self-preservation did not involve withdrawing from responsibility; it involved asserting the boundaries of legitimate professional authority when family-linked commercial pressure appeared to threaten safety. The self being preserved here was therefore a professional self.

P2's account extended this protective orientation by shifting the emphasis from personal endurance to team recognition:

"It makes me more resilience...to protect my team and step in for my team through their merit...my response to them, don't worry, I am here." (P2)

This extract shows that self-preservation was not only inward-looking. P2 positioned endurance as a responsibility to protect team members whose merit he believed had been overlooked. In this sense, protective agency operated both personally and relationally: preserving his own professional integrity while attempting to buffer others from the effects of perceived preferential treatment.

P3 provided a further variation. Rather than protecting through formal managerial authority alone, she protected her sense of self through voice and self-recognition:

"I know what I say or I stand-up for my right, that's nothing...but I just don't care and will speak-up. Because I know, they never appreciate us, but we need to appreciate ourselves." (P3)

P3's account is more ambivalent than P1's. She recognised that speaking might not produce organisational change, yet still framed voice as necessary to preserve self-worth. Across P1, P2, and P3, protective agency therefore involved different resources: professional authority, team responsibility, and self-recognition. The divergence matters because it prevents self-

preservation from being reduced to a single behaviour. It could appear as command authority, pastoral responsibility, or the refusal to let organisational non-recognition become self-erasure.

4.4 When Endurance Reaches Its Limit

The final theme concerns the point at which coping and endurance became insufficient. Exit readiness did not always mean immediate resignation. For P8, the wish to leave was constrained by financial and family responsibility:

"I cry and cry...very scared to resign at the same time due to our financial constraints...I want to help my husband. Times flies, 7 years and yes I am still here." (P8)

P8's account shows the tension between psychological distress and material constraint. Staying was not stability; it was a painful holding pattern in which the imagined risk of unemployment competed with the ongoing cost of remaining.

P7's account diverged because exit readiness had moved from thought to planned action:

"I made a decision to leave the company after being 10 years...only in June this year 2025, I really look out for the new opportunity, and thank god, I received an offer." (P7)

Unlike P8, P7 narrated exit as becoming possible after knowledge, confidence, and alternative employment accumulated. Her leaving was not simply a rejection of the organisation; it was a staged recovery of agency after prolonged endurance.

P1 offered a further divergent position because his professional mobility made exit available as a boundary-setting resource:

"I fight back. I hold my principle as a master. If you like, you let me manage, if you don't like, I can go to other vessels." (P1)

For P1, exit was not only escape; it was a statement of professional autonomy. Compared with P8's constrained fear and P7's delayed transition, P1's readiness to leave was supported by perceived employability and role confidence. Across the theme, exit readiness therefore emerged unevenly. It was shaped by financial dependence, family obligation, peer attachment, accumulated confidence, and perceived labour-market mobility. The wider synthesis is that staying and leaving were not opposites. Participants could remain physically present while psychologically preparing boundaries, alternatives, or conditions under which exit would become a form of self-preservation.

5. DISCUSSION

This study examined how non-family employees cope with, endure, and preserve themselves within organisational environments they perceive as nepotistic. The findings show that continued employment should not be read simply as acceptance, loyalty, or commitment. Instead, staying may reflect a constrained form of endurance shaped by normalised nepotism, limited perceived power, emotional distancing, protective responsibility, informal support, and exit readiness. This interpretation responds to recent calls for more process-

oriented and context-sensitive understandings of nepotism in organisations, particularly beyond its general negative outcomes (Jain et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2023; Schilpzand et al., 2025; Shatila et al., 2024).

5.1 Reinterpreting Staying as Endurance

The first contribution of this study is its reinterpretation of staying. In conventional organisational terms, employees who remain in an organisation may be viewed as committed, loyal, or sufficiently satisfied to continue employment. However, the findings suggest that in nepotistic organisational environments, staying can carry a different meaning. Participants' accounts showed that continued employment often reflected endurance rather than acceptance. Nepotism was described as prolonged and difficult to alter, creating a situation in which employees adjusted themselves to conditions they perceived as embedded in organisational life.

This finding extends nepotism research by shifting attention from whether nepotism produces negative outcomes to how employees live with those outcomes over time. Recent studies have shown that nepotism can undermine fairness perceptions, workplace commitment, career satisfaction, psychological attachment, and turnover-related responses (Burhan et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2023; Schilpzand et al., 2025). The present findings add that employees may continue to remain not because the harm has disappeared, but because the condition has become part of the organisational reality they must navigate.

5.2 Emotional Distancing and Disengagement as Self-Protection

The second contribution concerns the meaning of emotional distancing and disengagement. Employee disengagement is often treated as an organisational problem, associated with reduced motivation, weakened commitment, or withdrawal from work. The findings of this study suggest a more nuanced interpretation. Participants did not necessarily stop performing their formal duties. Instead, they reduced their emotional exposure to the organisation as a way of protecting themselves from repeated disappointment, frustration, or hurt.

This is important because it shows that emotional distancing may function as self-protection rather than simple apathy. In this sense, distancing was not a failure of professionalism. It was a coping strategy used to manage continued exposure to an environment perceived as unfair or emotionally burdensome. This supports recent coping literature which suggests that employees' responses to adverse workplace experiences may unfold over time and may be shaped by available personal and organisational resources (Sharma & Dhar, 2024).

5.3 Protective Agency and Professional Integrity

The third contribution is the finding that self-preservation was not always passive or individualistic. Some participants responded to perceived nepotism by protecting not only themselves but also others. This was especially visible among participants who held positions of responsibility and felt accountable for team members, safety, or professional standards. Rather than withdrawing completely, these participants attempted to preserve fairness, morale, and integrity within the limited space available to them.

This finding complicates the assumption that employees who experience nepotism respond only through silence,

resentment, or exit intention. Some participants engaged in protective agency by holding onto professional principles and supporting others who were affected by unequal recognition. Such responses extend research on coping with favouritism by showing that employees may respond to preferential treatment not only through individual adaptation, but also through attempts to protect collective morale and professional standards (Hotho et al., 2020; Schilpzand et al., 2025).

5.4 Exit Readiness as a Survival Response

The fourth contribution concerns exit readiness. The findings suggest that exit intention should not be understood only as dissatisfaction or reduced organisational commitment. For some participants, the possibility of leaving represented a boundary-setting response when endurance had reached its limit. Exit readiness emerged as a way of preserving dignity, professional autonomy, and psychological wellbeing when continued exposure became too costly.

The findings also show that exit readiness was unevenly available. For some participants, financial responsibilities and family obligations made leaving difficult even when staying was painful. For others, professional confidence, accumulated experience, or alternative employment made exit more imaginable. This interpretation is consistent with recent nepotism studies showing links between nepotism, psychological contract violation, workplace withdrawal, and turnover intention (Jain et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2023; Shatila et al., 2024), while also showing why intention and actual exit should not be treated as identical.

5.5 Theoretical Interpretation

Viewed through COR theory, the findings suggest that employees exposed to perceived nepotism attempt to conserve valued resources such as emotional energy, dignity, professional identity, social support, family stability, income security, and future career opportunities (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Emotional distancing, selective silence, lowered expectations, protective leadership, trusted peer support, and exit readiness can therefore be interpreted as resource-conservation responses. These responses may appear undesirable from the organisation's perspective, but from the employee's perspective they represent attempts to reduce further loss.

The analysis also shows that resource conservation is not purely individual. Participants' experiences were shaped by organisational hierarchy, family influence, peer relationships, family obligations, and perceived employability. P8's staying was constrained by household finances, P7's exit readiness strengthened as colleagues left and a new job became available, and P1's professional status made exit more imaginable. This adds an experiential dimension to COR by showing how employees evaluate not only what is being lost inside the organisation, but also what may be lost or protected if they stay, withdraw, speak, endure, or leave.

Overall, the findings contribute to organisational nepotism literature by showing that employees' responses to nepotism unfold as a survival process. Staying may become endurance, silence may become protection, disengagement may become emotional conservation, professional identity may become a defensive resource, and exit readiness may become a final attempt to preserve the self. Crucially, the findings show that this interpretation was drawn across P1–P8 rather than from a narrow set of illustrative extracts.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to organisational nepotism literature by extending the focus beyond the consequences of nepotism towards the process through which employees cope with and endure it. Existing studies have shown that nepotism is associated with fear-based silence, workplace withdrawal, reduced career satisfaction, psychological contract violation, reduced workplace commitment, and turnover intention (Jain et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2023; Shatila et al., 2024). The present study adds that these outcomes may develop through a survival process in which employees normalise prolonged unfairness, reduce emotional investment, protect their professional identity, draw on trusted relationships, and eventually consider exit as a form of self-preservation.

The findings also contribute to recent calls for more integrated and actor-centred understandings of nepotism in organisations (Schilpzand et al., 2025). By focusing on non-family employees' lived experiences, this study shows how employees positioned outside family networks interpret and respond to perceived family-based privilege. This shifts attention from nepotism as an organisational practice alone to nepotism as an experience that employees must continuously manage.

The study further contributes to coping and endurance literature by showing that endurance should not be automatically interpreted as resilience, acceptance, or organisational commitment. In this study, endurance reflected constrained adaptation to an organisational condition that participants perceived as difficult to change. This supports the view that coping with favouritism and adverse workplace experiences may involve complex forms of adjustment rather than simple resistance or acceptance (Hotho et al., 2020; Sharma & Dhar, 2024).

Finally, the study extends COR theory by showing how employees attempt to conserve valued resources such as emotional energy, dignity, professional identity, social support, family stability, income security, and future career options under perceived nepotism. The findings show that the same condition can produce different resource-conservation responses depending on role authority, family responsibility, peer support, and perceived mobility.

6.2 Managerial Implications

The findings have important implications for managers, especially in family-owned organisations. Managers should not assume that employees are committed, satisfied, or emotionally well simply because they remain in the organisation, continue performing their duties, or avoid open confrontation. The findings show that continued presence may conceal endurance, emotional distancing, and reduced psychological attachment.

Managers should therefore treat silence and disengagement as warning signals rather than as signs of compliance. Employees who stop speaking openly, reduce emotional involvement, or appear indifferent may be attempting to protect themselves from further disappointment or harm. If these responses are ignored, organisations may misread quiet endurance as stability while employees are already psychologically withdrawing or preparing to leave.

The findings also suggest that managers need to protect merit-based recognition more visibly. Participants' accounts showed that perceived unequal recognition was especially damaging when employees believed that family relationships or closeness to top management mattered more than competence. Transparent promotion criteria, documented performance evaluation, independent review of key employment decisions, and clear communication about recognition can help reduce perceptions that family-based privilege overrides merit.

6.3 Industry and Organisational Implications

For family-owned organisations in the Malaysian oil and gas context, the findings suggest that informal family power can create long-term silent endurance before employees consider exit. This matters because oil and gas work often involves specialised roles, operational responsibility, safety-sensitive environments, and accumulated technical knowledge. When experienced employees emotionally withdraw or prepare to leave, organisations may lose not only individual workers but also trust, continuity, and tacit expertise.

Organisations should therefore address nepotism as a governance and culture issue. Family-owned firms do not need to deny the presence of family relationships, but they need systems that prevent those relationships from undermining employee confidence in fairness and merit. Clear boundaries between ownership, family involvement, and employment decisions can reduce the likelihood that non-family employees interpret organisational decisions as predetermined by family ties.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited by its focus on eight non-family employees from three family-owned organisations operating within Malaysia's oil and gas industry. As an IPA study, its purpose was not statistical generalisation, but an in-depth interpretation of how participants made sense of coping, endurance, self-preservation, and exit readiness under perceived organisational nepotism. The findings should therefore be understood in terms of contextual transferability.

The study also focused only on non-family employees' retrospective accounts. It did not include the perspectives of family members, senior managers, organisational owners, or employees who may have benefited from family-based privilege. Future research could examine nepotism from multiple actor positions to understand how decision-makers, beneficiaries, and non-family employees interpret the same organisational practices.

Future studies could also use longitudinal and comparative designs to examine how employees' responses to nepotism change over time and across sectors, ownership structures, and cultural settings. Quantitative research may further test the relationships suggested in this study, including whether perceived nepotism predicts emotional distancing, protective silence, psychological withdrawal, and exit readiness through resource depletion or psychological contract violation.

8. CONCLUSION

This study examined how non-family employees cope with, endure, and preserve themselves within organisational environments they perceive as nepotistic. The findings show

that employees' continued presence should not be interpreted simply as acceptance, loyalty, or organisational commitment. In the context of prolonged and normalised nepotism, staying may represent a constrained form of endurance shaped by limited perceived power, emotional distancing, relational support, and the need to protect one's dignity and professional identity.

The study contributes to organisational nepotism literature by showing that employees' responses to nepotism unfold as a survival process. Silence and disengagement may function as self-protection, protective agency may preserve professional integrity, and exit readiness may represent a final attempt to regain control when endurance becomes psychologically or professionally costly.

Overall, the article argues that organisational survival under nepotism is not always visible as resistance or resignation. It may appear as ordinary attendance, quiet performance, reduced emotional investment, selective protection of professional values, and delayed exit readiness. Understanding these subtle forms of endurance is important for organisations that seek to retain employees not only physically, but also psychologically and professionally.

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