

ASSIGNMENT 1

An Ethical Assessment of Management Theories

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The Task

Select one of the case study options below (or propose your own organisation, subject to lecturer approval). Adopting the role of a management consultant, write a report that:

- Evaluates how mainstream management theories (e.g. Taylor, Fayol, Weber, contingency theory, systems theory) explain the challenges facing the organisation.
- Evaluates how critical management perspectives (e.g. CMS, Foucauldian analysis, feminist theory, post-bureaucratic theory, Lukes' power framework) offer alternative explanations for the same challenges.
- Recommends ethically sound and practically viable management reforms, drawing on both mainstream and critical perspectives.

Your report should demonstrate independent research beyond the sources provided in this guidance. You are expected to engage with academic literature, apply theoretical frameworks with precision, and develop a coherent, evidence-based argument.

Case Study Options

Option 1: Amazon

Amazon — Algorithmic Management and Labour Relations

Technology / Logistics

- Amazon's warehouse operations use algorithmic systems to monitor worker productivity in real time, tracking metrics such as "time off task" and automatically generating performance warnings. Research has documented how these systems push workers toward physical and psychological burnout.
- The company has faced sustained unionisation efforts, most notably at its Bessemer, Alabama facility and the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island. Academic studies (e.g. Wiggin, 2025) have examined how algorithmic management tools were used to shape the anti-union environment.
- Despite public commitments to worker wellbeing and safety, employee surveys and investigative reports consistently reveal high turnover, injuries above the industry average, and a culture of surveillance that limits worker autonomy.
- Amazon's rapid growth model prioritises operational efficiency and customer satisfaction, raising questions about whose interests the management system is designed to serve.

Evaluate how mainstream and critical management theories explain Amazon's approach to workforce management. Consider the ethical implications of algorithmic control and recommend reforms that balance operational efficiency with worker dignity and voice.

Option 2: Pinduoduo (Temu)

Pinduoduo / Temu — Extreme Corporate Culture and Worker Welfare

Technology / E-commerce (China)

- Pinduoduo, the parent company of global shopping platform Temu, has been widely documented for maintaining one of the most intense work cultures in the technology sector. Employees have reported routinely working 11-hour days, six days a week, in what is sometimes described as exceeding even the 996 norm (9am to 9pm, six days) common in Chinese tech.
- In January 2021, a 22-year-old Pinduoduo employee collapsed and died after leaving work at 1:30am. A second employee attempted suicide at the company's Shanghai office that same year. The incidents triggered widespread public debate about overwork culture in China's technology industry and the management ideologies that sustain it.
- When an employee posted about the death on social media, the company reportedly terminated them for damaging corporate reputation. Pinduoduo's public response emphasised the inevitability of sacrifice in pursuit of growth, drawing criticism for normalising exploitation as organisational virtue.

- Temu's rapid global expansion since 2022, built on an ultra-low-price model, has raised further questions about how the company's relentless cost and efficiency pressures extend beyond its own workforce to suppliers and logistics workers throughout the supply chain.

Evaluate how mainstream and critical management theories explain Pinduoduo's corporate culture and its consequences for workers. Consider the role of scientific management principles, management ideology, and power relations (e.g. Lukes' three dimensions) in shaping and justifying extreme work practices.

Option 3: Boohoo Group

Boohoo Group — Supply Chain Ethics and Management Accountability

Fast Fashion / Retail (UK)

- In 2020, a Sunday Times investigation revealed that garment factories in Leicester supplying Boohoo were paying workers as little as £3.50 per hour, well below the legal minimum wage of £8.72. Working conditions included inadequate COVID-19 safety measures and evidence of labour exploitation.
- An independent review found that Boohoo's board had been aware of supply chain risks for months before the scandal became public. Subsequent legal proceedings have alleged that senior leadership, including the company's founder, knew of the conditions.
- Boohoo introduced a management restructuring and established its own manufacturing facility in response. However, critics argue that the fast-fashion business model itself is structurally incompatible with ethical supply chain management.
- The case raises fundamental questions about management accountability: whether formal organisational structures and rational management processes can prevent exploitation when the commercial model depends on low-cost, high-volume production with minimal oversight.

Evaluate how mainstream and critical management theories explain the gap between Boohoo's public commitments and its supply chain practices. Consider how bureaucratic structures, managerial control systems, and power dynamics (e.g. Lukes' three dimensions) enabled and concealed labour exploitation.

Option 4: Own Choice

You may select a real organisation of your own choosing, provided it meets the following criteria:

- The organisation faces a documented management challenge with ethical dimensions.
- Sufficient publicly available evidence exists to support a critical analysis (news reports, academic articles, industry data, official statements).
- The case allows you to engage meaningfully with both mainstream and critical management theories.

Approval is required. Email your proposed organisation and a brief rationale (2–3 sentences) to your module leader by week 6. You will receive confirmation within five working days.