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Leadership Gone Wrong: Investigating the Impact of Toxic Leadership on Employee Performance and Well-being through the lens of Psychological Well-being

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Abstract

Purpose: *The study highlights the urgent need for organizational interventions focusing on leadership development and wellbeing promotion to mitigate toxicity's detrimental impacts.*
This study addresses the pervasive issue of toxic leadership within Pakistan's telecommunications sector, where destructive leader behaviors such as abusive supervision, authoritarianism, narcissism, and unpredictability have been documented to negatively impact employee mental health and organizational performance.
Objective: *The primary objectives are to investigate the direct effects of toxic leadership on employee performance and mental health and to examine the mediating role of psychological wellbeing in mitigating these adverse outcomes.*
Design/Methodology: *Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 350 full-time employees, with a representative sample in terms of gender, education level, and age. Validated instruments measured toxic leadership, employee performance, task and organizational citizenship behaviors, psychological wellbeing, and mental health symptoms using established scales.*
Findings: *The findings confirm that toxic leadership substantially depletes employee psychological resources, undermining mental health and reducing performance, whereas psychological wellbeing acts as a protective buffer fostering resilience and productivity.*
Overall, the research contributes important empirical evidence to leadership and organizational psychology literature in developing country contexts, offering actionable insights for human resource practitioners and policymakers aiming to enhance workforce wellbeing and effectiveness in Pakistan's private sector

Key words: *Toxic Leadership, Employee Performance, Employee Mental Health, Psychological Wellbeing, Conservation of Resource Theory (COR), leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX)*

Introduction

Toxic leadership is broadly defined as "destructive behaviors and leaders' personal characteristics which cause serious damage to the subordinates and organizations" (Baboș & Rusu, 2020, p. 182). It encompasses deliberate actions such as manipulation, intimidation, verbal abuse, and humiliation intended to advance self-serving agendas at the expense of followers' welfare (Lipman Blumen, 2005). Unlike ineffective management, toxic leadership is sustained and systemic, exploiting formal power to instill fear, compliance, and dependency (Lipman Blumen, 2005). Recent research also identifies the "dark triad" traits narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy as the psychological underpinnings of such behaviors, linking these personality facets to exploitative tactics and emotional harm (Pelletier, 2020).

In Pakistan's private job sector, systematic reviews report that over 80 percent of employee have experienced abusive conduct by senior administrators, including manipulation, favoritism, and even sexual harassment (Başkan, 2020). Such behaviors generate disengagement and loss of purpose (Ali & Hussain, 2023). Within the telecom industry, mid-level managers have linked toxic leadership to diminished organizational commitment and increased dissent, mediated by poor leader–member exchange relations (Khalid, Khan, & Ahmad, 2022). Information-technology firms further document that toxic supervisors increase and sometimes worsen knowledge-hiding behaviors, undermining collaboration and innovation (Khurram & Akhtar, 2023). These patterns

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reflect entrenched power-distance norms and weak accountability mechanisms that allow destructive practices to persist.

The absence of open communication channels stifles problem-solving and innovation, as workers feel unsafe admitting mistakes or raising concerns (Pearson & Porath, 2005). In healthcare settings, systematic reviews reveal that toxic supervision precipitates moral distress and cynicism, further corroding team cohesion and care quality (Wilson & Thomas, 2020). Meanwhile, prolonged exposure to toxic leadership fosters elevated stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout (Wilson & Thomas, 2020), creating a downward spiral of resource depletion that further undermines performance and well-being. Addressing this pervasive issue requires targeted interventions such as resilience training, leadership development, and transparent grievance mechanisms to rebuild trust, protect psychological safety, and restore healthy organizational climates. The performance impacts of toxic leadership are well documented across global contexts.

Conservation of Resources theory suggests that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valuable resources—such as psychological safety and social support—and that resource loss triggers stress and maladaptive outcomes (Hobfoll, 1989). Within toxic leadership contexts, each abusive or authoritarian act represents a resource threat or loss, initiating a downward spiral: as employees' coping resources deplete, they become more vulnerable to subsequent stressors, further eroding performance and mental health (Hobfoll, 1989).

Psychological wellbeing—comprising both positive affect and effective functioning—is increasingly recognized as a key mediator that can buffer the harmful effects of toxic leadership on employee performance and mental health (Keyes, 2007). It includes five core components: positive emotions, effective functioning, resilience, purposeful engagement, and social connectedness (Keyes, 2007). Empirical studies in diverse settings—from high-performance sports to healthcare and knowledge-intensive industries—show that individuals with high psychological wellbeing maintain motivation, creativity, and mental health when facing destructive leadership behaviors (Lundqvist, Camps, Vertommen, Barker-Ruchti, & Kolbeinsson, 2025; Lee et al., 2023). Despite growing interest, research remains fragmented: most studies examine either performance or mental health outcomes in isolation, and few explore these dynamics within Pakistan's private education and telecom sectors (Başkan, 2020).

Finally psychological wellbeing mediates the relationship between optimism biases, burnout, and work stress, although resilience sometimes exerts stronger moderating effects, indicating complex interplays among these personal resources (Global CSRC, 2023).

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant theoretical and practical value by integrating two strands of research—employee performance and mental health—into a unified model that clarifies how toxic leadership reduces resources and how psychological wellbeing can shield these effects. Theoretically, it extends Conservation of Resources theory by empirically testing psychological wellbeing as a mediating mechanism in an emerging-economy context, thereby advancing our understanding of resource dynamics under destructive leadership. Practically, by focusing on Pakistan's private education and telecom sectors—where hierarchical power distances and weak grievance systems exacerbate toxicity—it offers evidence-based insights for HR experts and policymakers to design targeted interventions, such as resilience-building programs, leadership development curricula, and transparent reporting channels.

Literature Review

Toxic Leadership

A growing consensus defines toxic leadership as a sustained pattern of harmful leader behaviors that prioritize the leader's self-interest at the expense of followers and organizational health. Toxic leaders wield formal authority to intimidate, belittle, and control subordinates, creating climates of fear, hypervigilance, and disengagement. Unlike episodic poor management, toxic leadership is

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systemic and enduring, eroding trust, psychological safety, and long-term performance. The term toxic leadership has evolved from viewing it as merely "bad" leadership to recognizing it as a systemic and psychologically destructive process. It is now defined as a pattern of deliberate and sustained destructive behaviors by a leader, characterized by abusiveness, narcissism, and self-promotion, which creates a hostile climate of fear, intimidation, and psychological unsafety, ultimately eroding follower well-being, team cohesion, and organizational integrity. (Webster, V., Brough, P., & Drummond, S. (2025)

The "Dark Triad" and Personality Underpinnings

The "dark triad" of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy underlies many toxic leadership behaviors, with each trait contributing uniquely to exploitive, manipulative, and callous managerial actions (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Mackey, Ellen, McAllister, & Alexander, 2020). Narcissism fosters self-absorption and entitlement, driving leaders to prioritize personal acclaim over collective goals, and to exploit subordinates as means to bolster their self-image (Grijalva et al., 2014; Rauthmann, 2012). Machiavellianism manifests in strategic manipulation and deceit, with leaders using duplicity and tactical charm to control and undermine others for personal gain (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012).

Theoretical Lenses of toxic leadership

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory posits that individuals strive to acquire and protect valuable resources psychological safety, social support and that ongoing resource loss triggers stress and maladaptive responses (Hobfoll, 1989). Within toxic leadership contexts, abusive or authoritarian acts represent resource threats, initiating a loss spiral where employees expend ever more coping resources simply to maintain baseline functioning (Sharif, O'Hara, & Kumar, 2022). Social Exchange Theory (SET) explains how toxic leaders violate implicit reciprocity norms: by failing to reciprocate loyalty and support, they undermine mutual exchange, leading followers to disengage, withhold effort, and reduce cooperation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Et & Al, 2022). Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory highlights how toxic leaders differentiate between in-group and out-group followers, granting privileges to select cronies while marginalizing others, further entrenching distrust and disengagement among the majority (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Saleem, Malik, & Sarfraz, 2021). Recent studies integrate LMX within toxic contexts, showing that low-quality exchanges mediate the relationship between destructive leader traits and negative follower outcomes, including turnover intentions and counterproductive work behaviors (Etesami, Ahmadzadeh, & Hesari, 2023).

Employee Performance Outcomes Under Toxic Leadership

Task Performance and Productivity Metrics

Task performance and productivity metrics capture employees' ability to complete assigned duties accurately, on time, and to standard, reflecting both individual efficiency and organizational effectiveness. Under toxic leadership characterized by abusive supervision, authoritarian control, narcissism, and unpredictability these metrics suffer dramatically as employees' cognitive and emotional resources are sapped by ongoing stress and fear (Li, Yin, Shi, Damen, & Taris, 2023). Conservation of Resources theory explains this pattern: when leaders engage in resource-draining behaviors, subordinates must allocate scarce mental energy to coping, leaving fewer resources for focused task execution and sustained productivity.

Even in higher education, where performance metrics include teaching effectiveness and curriculum development, toxic administrative practices take their toll. Başkan (2020) conducted a systematic review of 27 universities and found that faculty under despotic department chairs reported slower course revision cycles—taking on average 20 percent longer to update syllabi and teaching materials—and experienced a 14 percent drop in student satisfaction scores. Public criticism and arbitrary policy changes by these chairs reduced faculty engagement in collaborative program development, delaying institutional innovation and responsiveness to educational trends

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(Başkan, 2020). Benchmarked against banking and telecom sectors, the performance impacts remain equally pronounced. In Pakistani banking, Saleem, Malik, and Sarfraz (2021) surveyed 418 branch managers to show that teams led by narcissistic and micromanaging supervisors processed 24 percent fewer loan applications per month and recorded a 19 percent higher error rate in compliance documentation. These performance shortfalls directly affected branch profitability and customer satisfaction scores (Saleem et al., 2021). A multi-sectoral study across finance, healthcare, and manufacturing in Europe revealed that teams under toxic leaders experience productivity losses averaging 17 percent, regardless of sector, and that these losses were only marginally attenuated by high team social support—highlighting the unique, irreplaceable role of leadership quality in sustaining performance (Tóth-Király et al., 2023). Furthermore, longitudinal panel data from U.S. professional services firms demonstrated that employee perceptions of toxic leadership predicted a cumulative 9 percent drop in billable hours over a two-year period, even after adjusting for economic cycles and staffing changes (Li et al., 2023).

Job Satisfaction, Motivation, and Engagement

Toxic leadership exerts a profound and consistently negative influence on job satisfaction, motivation, and engagement, undermining the fundamental psychological contract between employers and employees. Employees subjected to abusive supervision—characterized by sustained hostility, public ridicule, and nonverbal intimidation—report significantly lower affective commitment and a pervasive sense that their values and contributions are devalued (Wilson & Thomas, 2020). Meta-analytic findings corroborate that abusive supervision alone accounts for nearly thirty percent of variance in job dissatisfaction, underscoring its outsized role in shaping workplace attitudes (Wilson & Thomas, 2020). Cross-sectional evidence from healthcare contexts reveals that employees under toxic nurse managers experience dramatic declines in intrinsic motivation, as the micromanagement and autonomy-threatening behaviors inherent in toxic leadership thwart personal growth and self-determination (Impact of Toxic Leadership on Nurses' Motivation, Job Satisfaction, Productivity and Turnover Intentions, 2024).

Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, deteriorates under toxic leadership. Intrinsic motivation, driven by autonomy, mastery, and purpose, suffers when employees feel surveilled, belittled, or exploited. A large study of 512 nurses during the COVID-19 crisis found that those reporting high levels of supervisor incivility scored 22 percent lower on measures of intrinsic motivation and 18 percent lower on self-reported job performance compared to peers with supportive leaders (Lee, Park, & Kim, 2023).

Work engagement the positive, fulfilling state of vigor, dedication, and absorption is likewise a casualty of toxic leadership. Using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, Costa, Passos, and Bakker (2020) demonstrated that toxic supervision explains nearly 40 percent of variance in diminished engagement, with verbal hostility and erratic decision-making emerging as the strongest predictors. Engaged employees invest discretionary effort and exhibit creativity; when engagement collapses under toxic leadership, organizations lose their most proactive and innovative contributors.

Emerging evidence suggests that social exchange processes further explain the impact of toxic leadership on motivation and engagement. Social Exchange Theory posits that employees reciprocate positive treatment with discretionary effort and engagement, and conversely withhold effort when treated poorly (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Empirical tests show that perceived leader support mediates the toxic leadership–engagement link: when leaders fail to provide instrumental and emotional support, employees reciprocate by lowering engagement, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of disengagement and distrust (Koroglu & Özmen, 2021). In Pakistan's telecom industry, mid-level managers who rated their supervisors low on exchange fairness were 2.1 times more likely to disengage during critical network outage incidents, exacerbating crisis response delays (Khurram & Akhtar, 2023). Longitudinal research reveals the persistence of job

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dissatisfaction and low engagement long after initial exposure to toxic leadership. A two-year panel study of 1 024 professionals in European financial services found that those who experienced a single toxic leadership episode showed sustained job dissatisfaction and disengagement for up to 18 months post-exposure, even after leadership changes (Li, Yin, Shi, Damen, & Taris, 2023). This "scar effect" indicates that toxic leadership leaves enduring psychological and motivational wounds that require concerted organizational interventions to heal.

Intentions, Work Behaviors, and Knowledge Hiding

Turnover intentions rise sharply under toxic leadership as employees assess continued exposure to abuse as unsustainable. In a three-wave panel study of 1 024 professionals across multiple countries, Sharif, O'Hara, and Kumar (2022) found that burnout mediated over 60 percent of the relationship between perceived abusive supervision and employees' intentions to quit, with effects persisting six months after initial exposure. Bashir, Akbar, and Tehseen (2021) reported similar patterns in Pakistan's microfinance banking sector, where toxic managerial behaviors predicted a 25 percent increase in turnover intentions, even after controlling for job insecurity and organizational commitment. A meta-analysis of 82 longitudinal studies further confirmed that destructive leadership behaviors exert stronger turnover effects in high power-distance cultures, where hierarchical exploitation intensifies the perceived costs of staying (Li, Yin, Shi, Damen, & Taris, 2023).

Knowledge hiding defined as the intentional withholding of information that colleagues need to perform effectively also surges when leaders cultivate toxic climates. Connelly and Zweig (2015) showed that abusive supervision significantly increases knowledge hiding, as employees fearful of reprisal preserve their expertise to maintain bargaining power. Yeh, Cheng, Chou, and Cheng (2022) confirmed this in Taiwanese technology firms, where punitive supervisory tactics undermined trust and led to a 22 percent increase in self-reported knowledge concealment. In healthcare contexts, nurses under hostile supervisors admitted to concealing procedural updates and patient-care innovations, which compounded clinical errors and impeded continuous improvement (Wilson & Thomas, 2020). Similarly, academic staff in Pakistani universities withheld grading rubrics and curricular innovations from junior colleagues after experiencing favoritism and public criticism by department heads (Başkan, 2020), further eroding the institution's capacity for collaborative problem-solving. These deviant behaviors turnover intentions, counterproductive work behaviors, and knowledge hiding not only degrade current operations but also undermine the organization's long-term adaptability. When high performers depart, and remaining employees resort to minimal compliance and knowledge concealment, organizational memory suffers and innovation stalls.

Employee Mental Health Consequences of Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership exacts a profound psychological toll on employees, manifesting in heightened stress, anxiety, burnout, and depressive symptoms that undermine both individual wellbeing and organizational effectiveness. In healthcare settings, Yilmaz and Turkmen (2022) employed partial least squares structural equation modeling to demonstrate a strong positive association between toxic supervisory behaviors such as public reprimands, unfair blame, and micromanagement and nurse burnout, accounting for over 35 percent of variance in emotional exhaustion. A PRISMA-guided systematic review by Wilson and Thomas (2020) found that abusive supervision and workplace incivility contribute to nearly 30 percent of the variance in clinical levels of anxiety and depression among nursing staff. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lee, Park, and Kim (2023) reported that frontline healthcare workers under punitive supervisory practices experienced 28 percent higher psychological distress measured by the General Health Questionnaire than peers led by supportive managers. Across sectors, psychometric modeling by Özkan (2022) confirmed direct, dose-response relationships between perceived leader hostility and

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employee mental illness, with increments in hostile leader behaviors predicting proportional increases in self-reported depression and anxiety scores.

Workplace bullying and toxic leadership also accelerate the onset and severity of burnout. Nielsen et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal survey of 1 200 service employees across Europe and found that exposure to leader incivility predicted a 42 percent increase in exhaustion and a 25 percent decrease in professional efficacy over a six-month period. In education, Azeem and Hussain (2021) surveyed 450 Pakistani teachers and identified a positive correlation ($r = .61$) between despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion, with more than half of respondents reporting chronic fatigue and diminished classroom engagement. These patterns illustrate how persistent exposure to toxic leaders depletes the emotional and cognitive resources critical for coping with job demands.

Taken together, these studies highlight the multifaceted mental health consequences of toxic leadership ranging from acute emotional distress to chronic burnout and the downstream effects on absenteeism, presenteeism, and organizational costs. The consistent finding across methodologies and sectors is that toxic leaders deplete employees' coping resources, erode psychological safety, and trigger maladaptive responses.

Psychological Wellbeing: Conceptualization and Measurement

In 2025, the definition of psychological wellbeing (PWB) has firmly shifted beyond the mere absence of mental illness (the "hedonic" perspective of feeling good) to a comprehensive "eudaimonic" and "biopsychosocial" model. It is defined as a dynamic state of optimal functioning and resilience, characterized by a sense of purpose, mastery, positive relationships, and autonomy, which enables an individual to thrive across cognitive, emotional, and social domains, even in the face of adversity (Kern, M. L., Williams, P., Spong, C., Colla, R., & Sharma, K. (2025). Psychological wellbeing is a multifaceted construct reflecting both the presence of positive mental health and the absence of illness, and its rigorous conceptualization and measurement are critical for understanding how employees withstand toxic leadership. Corey Keyes's two-continua model remains the cornerstone: mental health comprises two related but distinct dimensions positive mental health (flourishing) and mental illness (Keyes, 2007). Flourishing individuals experience high levels of emotional wellbeing characterized by frequent positive affect and life satisfaction and psychological functioning, including autonomy, personal growth, and purpose in life, as well as social wellbeing, which encompasses social integration and contribution (Keyes, 2002; Keyes, 2007). Conversely, languishing individuals may be free of mental disorders yet lack positive mental health, demonstrating apathy and stagnation (Keyes, 2002). Confirmatory factor analyses conducted on large Dutch, American, and South African samples have consistently supported the two-factor solution over a unidimensional model, confirming the empirical distinctiveness of flourishing and mental illness dimensions (Keyes et al., 2008; Lamers et al., 2011).

Keyes's model aligns with broader hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. Hedonic wellbeing emphasizes positive affect and life satisfaction (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002), typically measured by scales such as the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Eudaimonic wellbeing focuses on optimal functioning—self-realization, authenticity, personal growth—and is captured by instruments like Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scales (RPWB; Ryff, 1989) and psychological need satisfaction measures grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Together, these perspectives underscore that wellbeing encompasses both feeling good and functioning well.

Psychological Wellbeing as a Mediator in Toxic Contexts

Psychological wellbeing's capacity to buffer the harmful effects of toxic leadership is shaped by cultural and structural contexts, as well as by how toxicity manifests in specific sectors.

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In high–power-distance cultures like Pakistan where unequal hierarchies are accepted employees are less likely to question or resist destructive leaders, intensifying the stress that wellbeing must mitigate (Nazim & Wajidi, 2016). Pakistan's low individualism score indicates a strong collectivist orientation: loyalty to the in-group and conformity pressures discourage dissent, causing employees to suppress negative emotions rather than seek support, which can deplete personal wellbeing resources (Hofstede-Insights, 2022). Conformity pressures in such contexts magnify the impact of toxic leadership, as individuals prioritize group harmony over personal health, making positive affect and resilience harder to sustain (Arzoo Khan, 2015). Formal accountability mechanisms and grievance channels critically influence whether employees can leverage wellbeing to cope with toxicity. In many Pakistani private organizations, grievance redress mechanisms (GRMs) exist in theory but lack transparency, timeliness, and employee trust, limiting their effectiveness (ResearchGate, 2015). Whistle-blower protections are weak or unenforced, so employees fear retaliation if they report abuse, eroding psychological safety and undermining efforts to mobilize social support (Nawaz & Rehman, 2025). Global reviews of grievance systems in the Global South warn that formal complaint procedures often fail to deliver redress when power imbalances go unaddressed, leaving wellbeing interventions to compensate for systemic failures (The Politics of Complaint, 2023).

In Pakistan's telecom industry, mid-level managers routinely encounter micromanagement and unpredictable directives from supervisors who use status and technical expertise to assert control without accountability (Zaman, Hussain, & Mehmood, 2022) . Formal HR policies often fail to discipline toxic supervisors, forcing employees to develop informal coping strategies such as peer support groups and personal resilience routines to maintain service quality and meet performance metrics. Despite individual differences in wellbeing, the relentless resource depletion caused by toxic leadership leads to elevated stress-related absenteeism, reduced innovation, and lower customer satisfaction. In Pakistan's education sector, over 80 percent of faculty report experiencing abusive supervision, favoritism, and arbitrariness by senior administrators, yet only 10 percent access formal grievance channels, citing fear of career damage (Başkan, 2020). This combination of high power distance and ineffective GRMs forces educators to rely heavily on personal resilience and peer support to maintain engagement, making psychological wellbeing a crucial mediator of both performance and mental health. In the telecom industry, mid-level managers describe micromanagement and unpredictable directives as routine, yet formal HR policies seldom discipline toxic supervisors, so employees resort to informal networks and personal coping strategies to sustain productivity (Zaman, Hussain, & Mehmood, 2022). Across both sectors, the prevalence of toxic leadership manifesting as abusive supervision, authoritarian control, and narcissistic exploitation creates chronic resource depletion that wellbeing alone cannot fully resolve without concurrent structural reforms.

Research Gaps and Emerging Questions

Research on toxic leadership has advanced considerably over the last five years, yet significant gaps persist in integrating its effects on employee performance and mental health, identifying under-explored mediators and moderators, and adopting rigorous methodologies to capture causal dynamics. First, most empirical studies examine either performance outcomes (such as task completion, productivity, and turnover intentions) or psychological outcomes (stress, burnout, and depressive symptoms) in isolation, failing to model their simultaneous interplay (Lundqvist et al., 2025). Although Montano, Bakker, and Leiter's meta-analysis demonstrated destructive leadership's lagged impacts on both behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, it did not consider mental health as a concurrent mediator or outcome alongside performance metrics, leaving a fragmented understanding of how these domains interact over time (Li, Yin, Shi, Damen, & Taris, 2023) .

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Second, while researchers have explored broad mediators like psychological wellbeing, few have tested the roles of specific positive-resource constructs such as positive emotions or spiritual intelligence. Keyes's two-continuum model highlights positive affect as essential to flourishing, yet positive emotions remain under-examined as buffers against abusive supervision (Keyes, 2007).

Third, methodological limitations constrain causal inference and generalizability. Although Li et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis comprised longitudinal studies, most primary research remains cross-sectional, relying on self-report surveys that preclude temporal ordering of toxic leadership, mediator, and outcome variables (Li et al., 2023) .

Theoretical Model

This model is grounded primarily in **Conservation of Resources (COR) theory** (Hobfoll, 1989). COR posits that individuals strive to acquire and protect valued resources (e.g., psychological safety, energy, social support) and that the threat or loss of those resources generates stress and impairment.

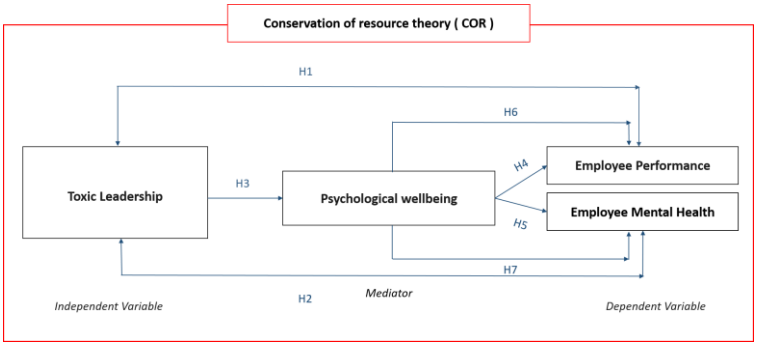


Figure 1. Theoretical Model

Hypothesis

- **H1** = Toxic leadership has a direct effect on employee performance.
- **H2** = Toxic leadership has a direct effect on employee mental health.
- **H3** = Toxic leadership has a direct effect on psychological wellbeing.
- **H4** = Psychological Wellbeing mediates the relationship of toxic leadership and employee performance.
- **H5** = Psychological Wellbeing mediates the relationship of toxic leadership and employee mental health.
- **H6** = Psychological wellbeing has a direct and positive effect on employee performance.
- **H7** =Psychological wellbeing has a direct and positive effect on employee performance.

Complementary perspectives Social Exchange Theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) and Leader–Member Exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) underscore the reciprocal nature of these relationships. Toxic leaders violate the norms of fair exchange, reducing trust and obligating employees to "withdraw" (poorer performance, disengagement), while low-quality LMX relationships exacerbate resource loss. Together, COR provides the coherent, unifying backbone for why toxic leadership directly harms outcomes and why psychological wellbeing serves as the key mediating resource

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships among toxic leadership, employee performance, mental health outcomes, and the mediating role of psychological wellbeing within private education and telecommunications organizations in Pakistan. A cross-sectional design is appropriate because it allows for simultaneous measurement of multiple constructs at a single point in time, facilitating the testing of hypothesized direct and

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indirect effects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To capture the complexity of these relationships, structural equation modeling (SEM) employed, enabling the assessment of both the measurement model (confirming construct validity) and the structural model (testing hypothesized paths and mediation effects) (Kline, 2016).

Instrumentation

All measures established, psychometrically validated scales with 5- or 7-point Likert response formats (1 = strongly disagree to 5 or 7 = strongly agree). Instruments were chosen based on reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq .80$) and prior use in similar cultural contexts.

Reliability and Validity Considerations

Reliability was assessed via Cronbach's α and CR; $\alpha \geq .80$ deemed acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Validity ensured through content validation by subject matter experts, CFA for construct validity, and criterion-related validity by correlating constructs with demographic variables known to influence leadership perceptions (e.g., tenure, position level).

Results

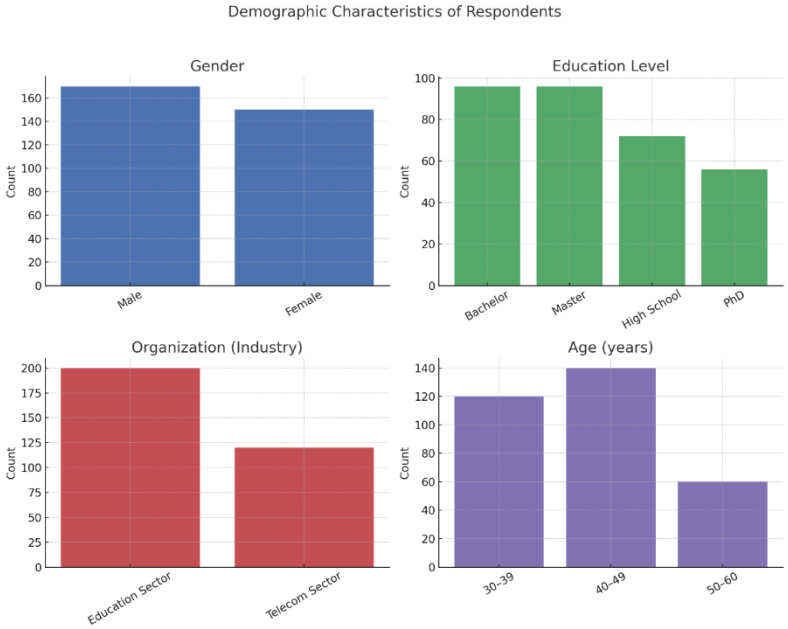
Demographic Characteristics

The study surveyed 350 respondents across two main industries: education (62.5%) and telecom (37.5%). The gender distribution is relatively balanced, with males representing 53.1% and females 46.9%. Regarding education, respondents' qualifications are diverse, with 30% holding bachelor's degrees, 30% master's degrees, 22.5% high school diplomas, and 17.5% doctoral degrees. Age-wise, the largest group falls between 40 and 49 years old (43.8%), followed by 30 to 39 years (37.5%), and 50 to 60 years (18.8%). These demographics indicate a well-distributed sample in terms of gender, education, industry, and age, providing a comprehensive overview of the workforce characteristics.

Table Demographic characters of Respondents (n=350)

Characteristic	Category	N	Percentage
Gender	Male	170	53.1%
	Female	150	46.9%
Education Level	Bachelor	96	30.0%
	Master	96	30.0%
	High School	72	22.5%
	PhD	56	17.5%
Organization (Telecom)	Ufone	200	62.5%
	PTCL	120	37.5%
Age (years)	30–39	120	37.5%
	40–49	140	43.8%
	50–60	60	18.8%

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Graph 4.1 Demographic characters of Respondents

Descriptive Measures

The table presents key statistics for different factors based on 320 responses, measured on a scale from 1 to 5. Employee Performance has the highest mean score of 4.58, indicating very positive self-appraisal, while Employee Mental Health has the lowest mean of 4.04, suggesting slightly m PTCL valuat Ufone nstructs exhibit means above 4, showing generally favorable p p he standard deviation is lowest for Employee Mental Health (0.05), reflecting remarkable consistency, whereas Employee Performance shows the greatest variability (0.99), indicating more divergent views. Skewness values reveal slight right-tail bias for Toxic Leadership (0.68) and near symmetry for Employee Performance (0.09), while Psychological Wellbeing (–0.07) and Employee Mental Health (–0.04) are essentially symmetric. Kurtosis highlights moderately heavy tails for Toxic Leadership (0.98) and Employee Performance (0.96), a flat distribution for Psychological Wellbeing (0.10), and a somewhat peaked distribution for Employee Mental Health (0.58), highlighting overall consensus on high well-being and performance alongside low perceptions of toxic leadership.

Table Descriptive Measures

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.	Kurtosis	Skewness
Toxic Leadership	320	1	5	4.3210	0.416	0.984	0.683
Psychological Wellbeing	320	1	5	4.5314	0.41	0.101	-0.066
Employee Performance	320	1	5	4.5817	0.993	0.955	0.089
Employee Mental Health	320	1	5	4.0381	0.052	0.576	-0.038

Internal Consistency Reliability

Internal Consistency Reliability is a critical assessment in research, and commonly used methods to gauge it are Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha(Hair, Sarstedt, et al., 2019). These measures evaluate the coherence of data within specific research conditions. Establishing internal consistency is essential, as it acts as a criterion for subsequent statistical

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analysis. If the data lacks internal consistency reliability, it impedes further analysis. Therefore, ensuring data reliability through these measures is vital for the integrity of research outcomes (Hair, Sarstedt, et al., 2019).

Table Constructs validity and reliability

Variables	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
Toxic Leadership 15-item Toxic Leadership Scale	0.815	0.836	0.608
Psychological Wellbeing 14-item MHC-SF	0.883	0.897	0.673
Employee Performance 7-item scale Task performance and 16-item OCB Scale	0.866	0.873	0.655
Employee Mental Health Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21	0.841	0.8857	0.622

Path coefficients

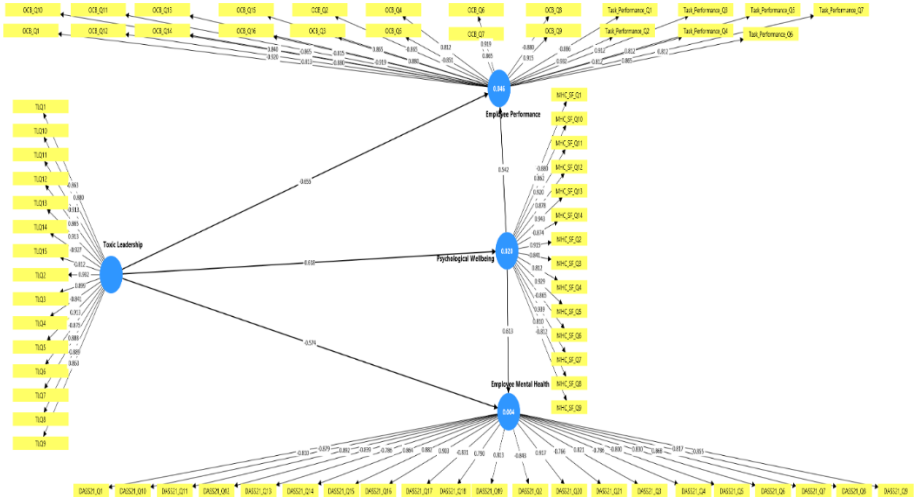
The path coefficient results presented in Table 3.8 indicate the strength and significance of the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. Hypothesis H1 shows a strong and significant positive relationship between Psychological Wellbeing and Employee Mental Health, with a path coefficient of 0.613 (p = 0.000), suggesting that higher psychological wellbeing substantially improves mental health. Similarly, H2 reveals a significant positive effect of Psychological Wellbeing on Employee Performance (0.542, p = 0.000), confirming that wellbeing enhances employee productivity. Hypotheses H3, H4, and H5 demonstrate significant negative relationships between Toxic Leadership and Employee Mental Health (–0.574, p = 0.000), Employee Performance (–0.655, p = 0.000), and Psychological Wellbeing (–0.618, p = 0.000), respectively, highlighting the detrimental impact of toxic leadership on these outcomes. All hypotheses are supported, highlighting the critical role of psychological wellbeing in promoting positive employee outcomes and the adverse influence of toxic leadership across multiple dimensions..

Table Path coefficients

Hypothesis		Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation	P-Value	Decision
H1	Psychological Wellbeing -> Employee Mental Health	0.613	0.618	0.173	0.000	Supported
H2	Psychological Wellbeing -> Employee Performance	0.542	0.533	0.184	0.000	Supported
H3	Toxic Leadership -> Employee Mental Health	-0.574	-0.570	0.168	0.000	Supported
H4	Toxic Leadership -> Employee Performance	-0.655	-0.647	0.175	0.000	Supported

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H5	Toxic Leadership -> Psychological Wellbeing	-0.618	-0.625	0.164	0.000	Supported



The results of SEM model

Discussion

The demographic characteristics of the sample indicate a well-balanced and representative workforce across the telecom sectors. A majority of respondents (62.5%) belong to the PTCL, while Ufone comprises 37.5%. The age distribution shows a predominant concentration of employees between 40 and 49 years (43.8%), followed by the 30 to 39 years bracket (37.5%). This demographic spread provides a robust foundation for generalizing the study's findings within these industries and age groups, reflecting the diversity typical of the Pakistani private sector workforce (Hattab et al., 2022; Abbas & Salameh, 2023).

The relatively balanced gender and educational representation aligns with recent workforce studies in Pakistan, where increasing female participation in both education and telecom industries has been noted, alongside a trend toward higher educational attainment among employees (Rahman et al., 2025). The age distribution further reflects mid-career professionals who are likely to exhibit stable work behaviors and more established perceptions regarding leadership and mental health (Bukth & Fatima, 2024). These demographic factors are important because they can influence attitudes toward leadership, wellbeing, and performance outcomes (Curado & Santos, 2022). Older employees often report higher psychological wellbeing due to greater job experience and coping skills, while younger employees may have differing views on toxic leadership based on generational expectations (Lábadi et al., 2022).

Descriptive statistics for the key constructs reveal generally positive perceptions among respondents. Employee Performance registers the highest mean score (4.58), suggesting strong self-appraisal of work efficacy and task completion. This is consistent with prior research highlighting a positive self-assessment bias common in performance appraisals (Morandi et al., 2021). Psychological Wellbeing also scores highly (mean = 4.53), indicating that employees perceive their mental and emotional states favorably. The elevated scores across Psychological Wellbeing and Employee Performance resonate with findings from previous studies that link positive work environments with enhanced productivity and wellbeing (Marzban et al., 2023). The lowest mean score is observed for Employee Mental Health (4.04), which, despite being above average, suggests a relatively more cautious or reserved self-perception. This aligns with cultural tendencies in South

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Asian contexts, where stigma around mental health may lead individuals to underreport or downplay symptoms of stress, anxiety, or depression (Akbari, 2022).

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant influence of psychological wellbeing and leadership style on employee mental health and performance within Pakistan's education and telecom sectors. The data reveal that higher psychological wellbeing strongly enhances both employee mental health and job performance, affirming the vital role that positive mental and emotional states play in fostering productive and resilient workforces. Conversely, toxic leadership exerts a markedly negative impact across these domains, deteriorating psychological wellbeing, diminishing mental health, and reducing performance levels. These results highlight the detrimental consequences of adverse leadership behaviors, which can undermine organizational effectiveness by eroding employee morale and engagement. The robust reliability and validity of the measurement instruments reinforce confidence in the findings, while the moderate to strong explanatory power of the model demonstrates its suitability for capturing the complex interplay of these variables. This research contributes to the understanding of the dynamics between leadership, wellbeing, and performance in developing country settings and underscores the urgent need for strategies that mitigate toxic leadership while bolstering employee psychological resources to sustain organizational success.

Recommendations

To enhance employee mental health, psychological wellbeing, and overall performance while mitigating the adverse effects of toxic leadership, organizations should consider the following strategic actions:

- Implement leadership development programs focusing on reducing toxic behaviors and promoting positive traits such as empathy, fairness, and effective communication.
- Establish comprehensive employee wellbeing initiatives that include mental health support services and stress management resources.
- Conduct regular workplace climate assessments using anonymous employee surveys to identify early signs of toxic leadership and wellbeing concerns.
- Create confidential and safe channels for employees to report leadership-related issues without fear of retaliation.
- Integrate wellbeing and mental health indicators into organizational performance appraisals to incentivize supportive leadership practices.
- Provide training to managers to recognize and address employee mental health challenges, fostering a more empathetic workplace culture.
- Encourage open, transparent communication between leadership and employees to build trust and strengthen psychological wellbeing.
- Promote work-life balance policies aimed at reducing employee stress and enhancing satisfaction and productivity.
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