DESPOTIC LEADERSHIP AND JOB SATISFACTION: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

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ABSTRACT

In the business environment, leadership plays a crucial and pivotal role. Following the Conservation of Resources Theory, the focus of this study was to examine the impact of despotic leadership on employee job satisfaction in the context of Pakistan. This research also analyzes the moderating role of psychological distress between despotic leadership and job satisfaction. Based on the purposive sampling technique, multi-source data was collected from 309 employees working in various service sector organizations. SEM for the measurement model and Hayes process to test the moderation. The findings validated that employee job satisfaction is negatively associated with leadership. Further, the moderating role of psychological distress in a link between despotic leadership and job satisfaction was also confirmed. The implications of these findings for service organizations are significant, as they suggest that psychological distress when paired with despotic leadership exacerbated the level of job satisfaction. We provide implications for theory and organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership has both positive and negative sides, positive leadership leads to improved organizational performance and productivity, and negative leadership contributes to the downfall of organizations (De Clercq et al. 2020). While the literature tends to focus on the advantages of positive leadership, there is also recognition of the negative consequences that leaders can have on their organizations. Negative leadership can lead to a decline in organizational productivity (Naseer et al. 2016). Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge that leadership can have both positive and negative impacts, and address any negative leadership behaviors to prevent negative outcomes. To foster a better understanding of leadership, it is

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important to acknowledge the negative impacts that leaders can have on their subordinates (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018). Negative leadership can take various forms, for example, despotic leadership has a particularly detrimental effect on employee work attitudes. Despotic leadership is characterized by leaders who prioritize their self-interest instead of colleagues or organizations, using their power to exploit employees and satisfy personal desires (Kasi et al. 2020). Such leadership style harms (Albashiti et al. 2021). Of all the negative consequences associated with despotic leadership, employee job satisfaction is particularly important (Nauman et al. 2018a). Despotic leadership has no place in organizations seeking to cultivate a positive work environment and employee satisfaction. When despotic leadership is observed in an organization, employees' job satisfaction decreases and employees become emotionally exhausted from their leader's self-serving actions and policies, often leading to a desire to switch jobs (Nauman et al., 2018). However, much of the research in the leadership literature has focused on positive aspects rather than negative aspects (Zhou et al., 2022). It is widely believed that destructive leadership can harm followers, engage in corruption, manipulate colleagues and followers, and even engage in criminal activities (Schyns & Hansbrough, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial to study both positive and negative aspects of leadership to fully understand its impact on organizations and individuals.

Despite the extensive research on negative leadership styles, despotic leadership remains a relatively unexplored topic (Naseer et al. 2016) and has been defined as those who prioritize self-interest and exploit their followers, exhibiting tyrannical, unethical, and arrogant behavior (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008). They do not tolerate any questions and demand obedience from their followers through authoritative behavior. Schilling (2009) argued that despotic leadership is the most toxic of all dark leadership styles, also known as "self-serving" leadership. Such leaders have the potential to harm their subordinates' well-being, negatively affecting organizational performance (Naseer et al. 2016). In this regard, Koser et al. (2018) added that destructive leadership styles not only impact individuals but also have adverse effects on the organization as a whole and have been called for more empirical studies (Son, & Pak, 2023).

Psychological distress has gained increasing attention in the workforce in recent times (Anasori et al., 2021; Botha et al., 2022) and has been recommended to be studied for moderating effect (Baquero, 2023; Zhang et al. 2023). The moderating role of psychological distress assumes that the relationship between despotic leadership and job satisfaction may be influenced by the level of psychological distress experienced by an employee. For example,

an employee who is experiencing high levels of psychological distress may be more likely to experience reduced job satisfaction in response to despotic leadership than an employee who is not experiencing psychological distress. Therefore, psychological distress can be seen as a factor that can influence the impact of despotic leadership on job satisfaction. If an employee is experiencing high levels of psychological distress, they may be more vulnerable to the undesirable influence of despotic leadership on job satisfaction. On the other hand, if an employee is not experiencing psychological distress, individuals who possess greater resilience may be better prepared to endure the harmful impact of despotic leadership on their job satisfaction.

Despotic leaders are characterized by authoritarian and dominating behaviors that serve their interests at the expense of their subordinates, often engaging in exploitation and unethical conduct (Aronson, 2001). Their actions have the potential to harm both individuals and organizational performance, making them an important topic for research (Naseer et al. 2016). It is particularly important to understand how these behaviors function in developing countries, which may have different cultural contexts and limited employment opportunities, as most research on leadership has been conducted in developed, Western countries (Naseer et al. 2016; Hofstede, 2007). Thus, testing the applicability of leadership concepts and their effects in developing countries is crucial.

Based on COR theory, we assume that despotic leadership is a vital cause of social stress and can be reflected in the relationship between supervisor and subordinate. Despotic leadership is authoritative and exploitative (Naseer et al. 2016) and can be observed in highly collectivistic and high-power distance cultures like Pakistan (Hofstede, 2007). The negative effects of despotic leadership tend to be more pronounced in cultures that are highly collectivist and exhibit significant power distance (Luthans et al. 2007). In such cultures, subordinates are typically expected to comply with their managers' instructions without hesitation, and supremacy variations are accepted. Therefore, Pakistani employees were deemed favorable for the study (Naseer et al., 2016), given their high levels of collectivism and power distance. In the same vein, despotic leadership has been recommended to be studied as the direct and moderating variable (Mubarak et al. 2022). Align with the call for further studies, the current study has been conducted and the framework has been presented in Figure 1.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despotic leadership is a harmful style where the leader exploits their power to oppress and mistreat their subordinates, acting like a dictator and showing little concern for their development or involvement in decision-making (Raja et al. 2020). Such leaders prioritize their growth and recognition over others, manifesting unfair and unethical behavior and creating a negative workplace environment (Nauman et al. 2018). This style of leadership can lead to reduced job satisfaction among employees, who may feel dissatisfied and unmotivated to work dedicatedly for the organization's performance (Khan et al. 2015; De Clercq et al. 2018). When leaders exert their authority over employees without showing respect, empathy, and humility, it creates an imbalance in the workplace. This can cause psychological strain on employees, leading to negative work attitudes, deviant behavior, and reduced overall job performance (Carnevale et al. 2017). In contrast, a fair and cooperative workplace that promotes employee satisfaction and self-fulfillment is crucial for both individual and organizational growth (De Clercq et al. 2018). Recently, numerous studies have suggested that leadership style is a crucial factor in determining employee job satisfaction. For example, Top et al. (2015) have shown that transformational leadership enhanced job satisfaction, leading to higher trust and higher levels of organizational commitment. Ironically, Braun et al. (2018) have discovered that dark leadership can decrease employees' production and job satisfaction (Li et al. 2015). Therefore, based on previous studies, this research hypothesizes that there is a negative relationship between despotic leadership and employees' job satisfaction.

H1: There is a significant relationship between despotic leadership and job satisfaction.

Moderating role

Challenge-oriented stress can positively impact employees' job satisfaction, while hindrance-oriented stress can have negative effects. Additionally, psychological distress resulting from destructive leadership behavior has been shown to decrease job satisfaction (Hon & Chan, 2013; Anasori et al. 2020a). Stress is inversely correlated to job satisfaction (Abideen et al. 2021; Tufail et al. 2018), and when employees' resources are expended in dealing with stress, they may involve in self-protective or drawing coping strategies, leading to emotional exhaustion and further job dissatisfaction (Park & Min, 2020; Ahmad & Begum, 2020). Psychological distress has been identified as a major concern in the workplace, with a potential negative impact on employee job satisfaction. Research has shown that job satisfaction is not only related to work-related factors such as pay and benefits but also to

individual characteristics, such as personality traits and psychological well-being. High psychological distress levels among employees are associated with decreased job involvement (Garg & Rastogi, 2006). Thus, psychological distress resulting from destructive leadership behavior can deplete employees' emotional resources and lead to job dissatisfaction.

When employees have to work with a despotic leader, it can be a significant workplace stressor. According to the COR theory, Through stressful situations, employees can obtain and develop new resources, that they can utilize to effectively cope with the challenges they face (Hobfoll, 2001). Additionally, the COR theory suggests that individuals experience distress when they face potential resource depletion or failure to acquire resources, leaving them susceptible to losing their existing resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Considering despotic leadership as an organizational stressor, individuals may experience loss and maintain resources (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). As a result, workforces may practice emotional instability and a reduction in social resources which can lead to increased psychological distress and a decreased sense of organizational identification (Anasori et al. 2021). Thus, the workforce may react to such stressors by exhibiting unfavorable work outcomes to preserve their lasting resources (Hobfoll, 1989), which may manifest as deviant work behavior (Park & Min, 2020).

Employees who experience high levels of psychological distress are more likely to experience reduced job satisfaction in response to despotic leadership. This is because employees who are experiencing psychological distress may have reduced coping mechanisms and resilience, which can make them more vulnerable to the negative effects of despotic leadership. Additionally, employees who are experiencing psychological distress may be more likely to perceive despotic leadership behaviors as threatening or abusive, which can further exacerbate their distress and reduce their job satisfaction. On the other hand, employees who are not experiencing psychological distress may be more resilient to the harmful effects of despotic leadership on job satisfaction. They may be better able to cope with the stress and negative behaviors of a despotic leader, which can help them maintain their job satisfaction. Therefore, when employees are subjected to despotic leadership behavior, they may experience a decline in their sense of identity and a depletion of emotional resources, leading to negative work outcomes as a protective mechanism against further loss. Based on this reasoning, we anticipate that the combination of despotic

leadership and psychological distress will result in a more negative impact on job satisfaction for employees. Therefore,

H2: Psychological distress is significantly associated with job satisfaction.

H3: Psychological distress moderates the relationship between despotic leadership and job satisfaction.
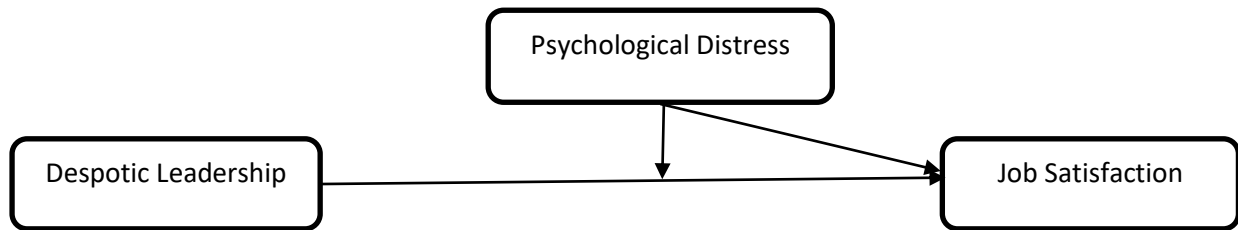

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

METHODOLOGY

The study focused on various service sector organizations located in different major cities of Pakistan, which were identified through personal connections. Formal consent was obtained from the Heads of selected organizations. Survey questionnaires were distributed to these respondents in person, and they were given the option to participate voluntarily. Based on the purposive sampling technique, Officer-ranked employees were selected. The survey followed anonymous participation based on convenience (Cooksey, 2007). Participants were required to complete consent forms before their involvement in the study, which detailed the study's objectives and assured complete confidentiality. The language of the survey was English, the official mode of communication in Pakistani organizations (Tufail et al. 2017). To address the issue of social desirability and ensure the respondents' confidence, we made it clear that only the researchers would have access to the responses, no individual-level data would be disclosed, and only aggregated data would be shared. Additionally, we followed up with non-respondents and late respondents to improve the response rate. These measures were instrumental in maintaining a reasonable sample size and broad representation of demographic characteristics, and job levels. To minimize the issue of common method variance, we conducted data collection in two phases, which were 3 weeks apart (Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff et al. 2003). Reversed causality is less likely when there is a three-week gap between the measurements of the independent and dependent variables, but it is still possible (Johnson et al., 2011) and minimizes the expectancy bias (De Clerq et al., 2019). We used multi-source data. Data regarding despotic leadership was obtained in the first phase and the respondents recorded responses regarding the leadership style. During the second phase, conducted two weeks later, participants were requested to report their psychological

distress and job satisfaction. A unique question was added to the survey which was not related to any variables to seek and check the attention and accuracy of the respondents (Lin et al. 2021). A unique identification code was utilized on the survey to link the two phases of the questionnaire while maintaining participant anonymity. The survey was initially distributed to 450 employees, and 328 complete surveys were returned and analyzed. This method of data collection was utilized to ensure the confidentiality of the survey responses and to increase the response rate.

Male respondents accounted for over 50% of the total sample (N=328, 64.7%) and the majority were in the age group between 30-40 years of age. In Pakistan, the male population exceeds the female population, and over two-thirds of the country's total population is under the age of 35, which is consistent with the broader demographic trends (Islam et al., 2021). Regarding qualification, most of the respondents (73.2%) were having 16 years of Education and lastly, the highest tenure of the employees in these organizations was reported 16.4%.

Instruments

For primary data collection, adopted questionnaires were utilized. According to Luthand and Youssed (2007), utilizing established and standardized scales for measuring the study's variables can decrease the possibility of instrumentation errors. All the items on the scales were on a five-point Likert scale. The scales used in this study have been presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Instruments

S. No	Variable	Author	No of items
1	Despotic leadership	De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008)	6
2	Job satisfaction	Cammann et al. (1979)	3
3	Psychological distress	Kessler et al. (2002).	6

ANALYSIS

Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was run to test the validity and reliability of the adopted scales. Factor loading, Reliability, rho_A, composite reliability (CV), and average variance extracted (AVE) were measured. All items had a factor loading value of over 0.60 as the threshold. Similarly, the minimum acceptable values for Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability were found above 0.70. Lastly, the obtained AVE value must be above 0.5 for all constructs (Huang, 2021). The obtained values of the constructs have been presented in Table 2 and were above the threshold values resulting the reliability and validity.

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity.

Dimensions of constructs	Factor Loading	Cronbach Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Despotic Leadership		0.91	0.96	0.978	0.871
DL1	0.927				
DL2	0.893				
DL3	0.959				
DL4	0.955				
DL5	0.812				
DL6	0.891				
Job Satisfaction		0.78	0.926	0.931	0.681
JS1	0.802				
JS2	0.798				
JS3	0.8.76				
Psychological Distress		0.84	0.932	0.912	0.691
PD1	0.802				
PD2	0.721				
PD3	0.765				
PD4	0.831				
PD5	0.782				
PD6	0.858				

Correlations, means and SD values have been exhibited in Table 3 which shows that there is an inverse relationship between despotic leadership and job satisfaction. Similarly, the relationship between psychological distress and job satisfaction was also inversely correlated providing initial support for the proposed hypotheses.

Table 3. Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

	DL	JS	PSD	Mean	SD
DL	1			1.98	0.72
JS	-0.48**	1		2.27	0.92
PSD	0.51**	-0.52**	1	2.91	0.94

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The direct and moderation results in Table 4 demonstrate that there is an indirect relationship between despotic leadership and job satisfaction ($\beta = -0.46$, $p < 0.1$). Similarly, the inverse

relationship between despotic leadership and job satisfaction was also confirmed (β = -0 .49, p<0.1), thus, confirming both hypotheses.

To test the moderating impact of psychological distress on the relationship between despotic leadership and job satisfaction, we conducted moderated regression analysis suggested by Cohen et al. (2003). We centered despotic leadership and psychological distress for this purpose. Additionally, to check the multicollinearity among variables we conducted the tolerance statistics (TS) (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) and variance inflation factor (VIF) scores (Black & Babin, 2019) VIF and TS are used to assess the collinearity among predictors on the accuracy of a regression model. The threshold value for TS should be above 0.10 (Hair et al. 1998), and for VIF it should be below 5 (Chatterjee & Price, 1991). The obtained values i.e. TS=0.82 and VIF= 2.98, were in the acceptable range thus negating multicollinearity.

Moderating analysis was conducted in three steps. In the first step, gender was entered, while in the second step, the independent variable i.e. despotic leadership and moderating variable i.e. psychological distress were entered and in the last step the interactive term of despotic leadership and psychological leadership was entered. The combined effect of despotic leadership and psychological distress was significant (β = -0.34, p < 0.001). Similarly, we found the R^2 value 0.21 which was significant and confirmed the moderating effect.

Table 4: Moderation analysis

	JS		
	β	**R²**	**Δ R²**
Step 1			
Gender		0.43**	
Step 2			
DL	-0.46**	0.23**	
PSD	-0.49**	0.28**	
Step 3			
DL x PSD	-0.34**	0.36**	0.21**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the impact of despotic leadership on job satisfaction among employees, with psychological distress as a moderator. Our findings indicated a negative relationship between despotic leadership and job satisfaction. This suggests that when leaders exhibit behaviors such as punishment and showing no compassion or tolerance, there is a higher likelihood of employees experiencing job dissatisfaction. The findings align

with previous research indicating that has linked destructive leadership behaviors with more psychological distress (Nauman et al., 2018). Numerous studies have highlighted the negative impact of despotic leadership on job satisfaction in different regions and among various sampling units for example Zhang et al. (2022a) in China and Khamisa et al. (2015) in South Africa. In a study of the hospitality industry, Alshawish and Nairat (2020) found that despotic leadership behaviors were adversely linked with job satisfaction. Employees working under despotic leadership may feel less connected to their work and their organization, reducing their sense of belonging and satisfaction (Anasori et al. 2021).

Our results align with prior research indicating that psychological distress increases the risk of reduced job satisfaction (Zhang et al. 2022b). Additionally, similar to previous studies (Alshawish & Nairat, 2020), the current study found that psychological distress harms employees' job outcomes. Furthermore, consistent with prior research (Feng et al., 2018; Kaya & Isler Dalgic, 2021), the correlation analysis in this study showed a negative correlation between psychological distress and job satisfaction. These findings are consistent with previous research that has linked psychological distress with negative work outcomes like job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and detachment (Borritz et al. 2006). Our study reveals that the impact of despotic leadership on employee behavior is influenced by the presence of psychological distress. When both despotic leadership and psychological distress are present, they have a more significant impact on job satisfaction. Organizations need to recognize the negative effects of psychological distress on employee job satisfaction and take measures to address this issue. Such measures may include providing support and resources for employees to manage their stress levels, promoting a positive work culture, and offering counseling services for employees who may be experiencing psychological distress. These results align with previous studies that have shown the detrimental impact of psychological distress on job satisfaction (Zhang et al. 2022a; Alshawish & Nairat, 2020). Moreover, the current study's findings align with preceding research that has highlighted the undesirable consequences of despotic leadership on employee outcomes (Park & Min, 2020).

The findings provide support for the moderating role of psychological distress. The negative association between despotic leadership and job satisfaction was found to be stronger when psychological distress was higher. This implies that the detrimental effects of despotic leadership on job satisfaction are made worse by psychological distress. The moderating role of psychological distress is also supported by previous studies that have shown its impact on emotional exhaustion; this can result in negative work attitudes, like job dissatisfaction,

absenteeism, and disengagement from work (Anasori et al. 2020b). Organizations should focus on reducing despotic leadership behaviors to minimize their negative impact on job satisfaction. Additionally, interventions that address psychological distress among employees may be beneficial in mitigating the undesirable influence of despotic leadership on job satisfaction.

Theoretical and practical implications

A crucial practical implication of the study is that organizations need to be aware of the harmful effects of despotic leadership. Failing to identify and address such leadership tendencies can result in emotionally exhausted and dissatisfied employees. To prevent this, organizations should take steps to avoid appointing despotic leaders and provide employees with easy access to confidential feedback mechanisms such as the human resources department. It is important to ensure that feedback is handled with utmost confidentiality as despotic leaders may retaliate against employees who provide negative feedback. If feedback is received, it should be thoroughly investigated and addressed through appropriate channels. Checks and balances can also be implemented to prevent the rise of despotic leadership (Padilla et al. 2007). Incentive-based rewards such as opportunities for career promotion and recognition may be effective in increasing self-esteem. This can help to reduce emotional exhaustion among subordinates, as evidenced by prior research (Ceschi et al. 2017). Additionally, interventions like psychological training can be effective in reducing emotional exhaustion and other deviant behaviors (Costantini et al. 2017). To mitigate the detrimental influence of despotic leadership, HR can foster a positive working environment to reduce despotic leadership and provide support to subordinates who may have suffered. To help employees alleviate anxiety stemming from dissatisfaction with their personal and organizational lives, recovery activities such as relaxation, exercise, and personal control, may be effective (Sonnentag et al. 2010).

The research findings suggest that organizations should take precautionary measures when appointing leaders and conduct periodic evaluations to identify those who exhibit a desire to exert power and treat subordinates with unethical behavior. Providing leaders with training on moral and ethical behavior and equal opportunity can help them integrate these values into their leadership practices. It is also essential to engage employees in training sessions to create a positive organizational climate that discourages despotic behavior. Leaders need to reassess their attitudes and behaviors, and for organizational decision-makers to adopt

policies that identify and mitigate any despotic tendencies in potential leaders. This could include regularly collecting feedback from both subordinates and peers.

Organizations should strive to create a positive work environment that fosters open communication, values employee input, and provides resources for managing workplace stress. By doing so, they can mitigate the negative impact of despotic leadership and psychological distress on job satisfaction and promote employee well-being. By promoting employee well-being, organizations can help to reduce the negative impact of despotic leadership on job satisfaction and promote a healthier and more productive workplace.

Limitations and recommendations

The first limitation of the study was the accuracy. To enhance the accuracy of the results, data were collected from the same participants and their responses were matched with time-lagged responses. Although participants voluntarily participated, there may be a self-selection bias. However, we are confident that the results are not significantly impacted by self-selection bias, as evidenced by the high response rate throughout data collection.

 Second, it is important to note that the study was conducted in Pakistani industries where authoritarian leadership is common and culturally accepted. Therefore, the study results may not be generalizable to other countries due to the influence of contextual and situational factors as well as the impact of Pakistani culture. Future research may need to validate the study conclusions in Western countries to address cross-cultural differences.

Lastly, To gain a deeper understanding of how despotic leadership impacts job outcomes, future research could examine other forms of destructive leadership, such as abusive supervision, derailed leadership, or tyrannical leadership. Additionally, other personal factors that may moderate the relationship between despotic leadership and job outcomes could be examined (Tufail et al. 2022).

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