

## Impact of Despotic Leadership on Workplace Incivility: Serial Mediation of Stress and Emotional Exhaustion

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Considering the importance of despotic leadership to employees' negative outcomes, this study explored how despotic leadership affects workplace incivility. Drawing on the dark side of leadership, the current study conceptualizes a model to explore the mechanism underlining the despotic leadership and workplace incivility relationship.

**Design/Methodology:** A cross-lagged survey approach was employed to collect data from 249 employees through questionnaires from Pakistan's healthcare sector. Model based on structural equation was employed for data analysis.

**Findings:** Results of the study indicate that employees working in the health sector perceive incivility as a foremost consequence of despotic leadership, stress and emotional exhaustion.

**Originality:** This research painted a more comprehensive picture of despotic leadership and workplace incivility relationship in the health sector. We conclude that leveraging the bright side while acknowledging the dark side of leadership is an appropriate coping strategy to deal with workplace incivility. The aim of this study is to understand relationship between despotic leadership (DL) and workplace incivility (WI) with serial mediation of stress and emotional exhaustion (EE) in healthcare sector. The study strives to present empirical evidence for negative impact of DL on WI and its toll on employee performance.

**Keywords:** *Despotic Leadership, Workplace Incivility, Stress, Emotional Exhaustion, Serial Mediation.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Leadership has been described as an individual's capability to influence others towards organizational objectives achievement. Leadership has remained a significant focus of interest, and ample research has been done on leadership. From the time of inception of the leadership concept in academia, the focus has been on exploring the positive attributes of leadership (Schilling, 2009). Extensive research has been conducted to examine the impact of leadership on creating positive employee behaviors and attitudes leading to enhanced organizational performance. (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 1981). However, in recent times attention has shifted towards misbehaviors and mistreatments of leaders towards their subordinates and research has shown that the phenomenon requires investigation (De Clercq et al., 2021; Raja et al., 2020). Islam et al. (2022) and Nauman et al. (2018) highlight that a leader's bad behavior at the workplace leads to employee dissatisfaction, deviance, and personal life conflicts.

A paradigm shift has been observed in the focus on the adverse effects of leaders on their subordinates and different labels have been used to conceptualize and investigate (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019). Abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007), tyrannical or destructive leadership (Einarsen et al., 2007), petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994), and despotic leadership (Aronson, 2001; Nauman et al., 2018) are a few terms that have been used to highlight the negative effect of leaders on subordinates. The workplace in contemporary settings has been identified as a harsh and taxing environment where leaders are abusive and employees reciprocate with deceit and deviance (Fisher, 2005). Such aggressive behaviors also hamper organizational performance and negatively influence employee morale, productive behavior and psychological health (Cortina et al., 2001; Tepper, 2000). These behaviors eat away organizations capital and increase operational cost (Detert & Burris, 2007).

Because of such negative consequences of factors including aggressive behavior and despotic leadership, factors encompassing "dark or destructive side of leadership" (Griffin & O'Leary-Kelly, 2004) need to be explored as current research is limited. Among these variables, despotic leadership is considered to be most dominant type of negative leadership style (Schilling, 2009). Despotic leadership (DL) is defined as "the systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization's goals, tasks, resources, and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates" (Einarsen et al., 2007). Despotic leaders are driven by self-interest and have inherent will to dominate others at the workplace, so they act like dictators by using their powers pitilessly, unfairly, oppressively and capriciously (Aronson, 2001). Leaders of such sort have no interest in subordinate needs. They do not involve employees in decision making (Aronson, 2001) and tend to act cold-heartedly (De Clercq et al., 2021; Schilling, 2009).

Despite the significant relation between despotic leadership on negative outcomes, the literature available, especially in the context of workplace deviance and workplace incivility is limited. Few authors including (Islam et al., 2022; Jha & Sud, 2021), have done their research to test the effect of abusive supervision and DL on workplace deviance; however, the literature available to date is still scant and needs further investigation. Moreover, current literature has focused on deviance and counterproductive behaviors that have a clear intent to harm. However, despotic leadership in connection of incivility where the behavior of employees is unconscious or subconscious with ambiguous intent to harm is limited.

Despotic leaders cause employees to show adverse behaviors at the workplace, but the relationship is not as simple as it seems. Breckler (1984) empirically established that attitude has three subcomponents that are affect, cognition and behavior. Cognition refers to totality of thought processes based on previous experiences, while affect refers to the emotional aspect of an individual. The behavioral part is related to the tendency of an individual to behave in a certain manner and act as a precursor of actual behavior (Breckler, 1984). Stimuli at the workplace trigger affective components of attitude that may lead to certain behaviors. These behaviors can best be understood by examining the affective, cognitive and behavioral apparatuses of attitude and the stimuli that triggered it (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). We postulate that negative stimuli would create a negative affective component leading to a negative attitude ultimately leading to negative behavior and vice versa.

Within the best limits of our knowledge, this study is among the first ones to study the impact of DL on workplace incivility (WI). Deviance in the context of DL has been tested by (Islam et al., 2022); however, incivility which has ambiguous intent, is yet to be explored. Moreover, the relationship between DL and WI is complex, which can be explained through a serial mediation model. This study also aims to study the impact of despotic leadership on incivility via serial mediation of stress and emotional exhaustion, which has not been explored. Such studies are important especially in the context of the healthcare sector of developing countries as they suffer from high power distance. Moreover, these developing nations have recently reported instances of supervisor abusive and negative behavior (Naseer et al., 2016; Raja et al., 2020). Study also aims to investigate the impact of DL on workplace incivility against the backdrop of Pakistan's healthcare sector, a country which is in developing phase and negative leadership cases have been reported over the past few years (Naseer et al., 2016). Evidence of DL leading to workplace deviance in the healthcare sector has been found in the study conducted by (Islam et al., 2022), however, Despotic leadership's relationship with incivility requires investigation.

Healthcare is also pivotal from economic perspective as it helps in economic growth and expansion. It can serve as the backbone for country's economy, particularly in the wake of Covid-19 which impacted the global financial system (Mehmood et al., 2023). Doctors, nurses, and paramedic staff alike work under

mental and psychological pressure dealing with life and death scenarios, and despotic leaders in such situations can cause them to show adverse and uncivil behaviors that not only prove harmful for the work environment but also for the patients under their care (Kayani et al., 2021). Samad et al. (2021) established that despotic leaders negatively affect nurses performance leading to depreciated healthcare services. Saeed et al. (2022) reported similar results substantiating the negative effects of despotic leaders on healthcare personnel. The current study aims to contribute and extend the literature available on DL and its impact on WI in healthcare context.

The negative outcome as a result of negative leadership is not desirable at the workplace and the relationship is not as simple as it seems. Despotic leadership when depicted in an organization stimulates negative affective components that employees go through. Among these affective components is stress and emotional exhaustion which ultimately trigger negative behaviors in employees. We propose that despotic leadership leads to stress in employees resulting in emotional exhaustion that ultimately results in workplace incivility. Stress is “emotional and physical reactions to the incidents manifesting at workplace” (Wright, 2007). Stress is a well-known factor in the context of organization and can result in several negative outcomes including deviance, lower motivation, lower productivity, high turnover, and poor communication and conflict (Akgunduz & Gürel, 2019; Beehr, 2014). Stress also results in hampering employees ability to perform ultimately damaging organization’s performance (Batista & Reio Jr, 2019).

An employee experiencing stress because of despotic leadership may experience burnout that as per Maslach (2003) manifests itself in form of EE. Emotional exhaustion can be defined as “feeling of emotionally exhausted and extended by one’s work” (Maslach et al., 2001). A very significant part of an employee’s job is the treatment and instructions received from supervisor that lay the foundation of employee performance. Employees experiencing workplace stressor may feel emotionally exhausted and are not able to cope with negative aspects at workplace (Koon & Pun, 2018). Consequently, they may respond by showing uncivil behaviors.

The relationships identified are based on the premises of affective events theory (AET) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 2017). AET proposes that individuals at workplace are emotional, and their behaviors are guided by emotions. We propose that employees behave to different events occurring at the workplace and these incidents trigger certain emotions in employees that ultimately affect their behaviors. Consequently, negative incidents at workplace trigger negative emotions in employees resulting in depiction of negative behaviors from employees (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). SET conversely aids in understanding behavioral and attitudinal reactions based on give and take between parties. Based on its premise, it can be perceived that despotic leader will be reciprocated by employees with undesirable behavior (Palmer et al., 2017). In totality, the study aims to add to the work available on the

dark side of leadership by studying the unattended association of DL with WI in the presence of stress and EE as serial mediators. Literature available on DL – WI relationship is limited moreover; serial mediation of stress and EE has not been examined which raises a pertinent question requiring empirical investigation. Despotic leadership causes adverse behaviors which leads to a negative toll on organizational performance (Islam et al., 2022).

Moreover, current research aims to address following objectives and questions.

Objective 1. To explore the impact of DL on WI.

Objective 2. To explore the role of stress as a mediator between DL and WI.

Objective 3. To explore the role of EE as a mediator between DL and WI.

Objective 4. To explore stress and EE as serial mediators between DL and WI.

Question 1. Does DL have a significant impact on WI?

Question 2. Does stress mediate DL and WI relationship?

Question 3. Does EE mediate DL and WI relationship?

Question 4. Does stress and EE serially mediate DL and WI relationship?

### **Theory, Literature Review and Hypotheses**

Social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 2017) and Affective events theory (AET) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) have been used as a lens to explain how despotic leadership may cause stress and emotional exhaustion in followers, ultimately leading to incivility. SET proposes that individual's interaction is based on the premise of cost-benefit analysis. The positive or negative consequences drive individuals' behaviors (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In the current study, despotic leadership is considered to have negative consequences as such leaders are selfish, self-centered and personal benefit driven by suppressing their followers. In such instances where followers are receiving negative consequence in form of oppression and dominance, they would reciprocate through negative behaviors including deviance and incivility.

AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) proposes that negative and positive occurrences at workplace shape and affect emotions of employees. Such emotions determine behaviors that employees are expected to show. For our study, despotic leadership creates negative emotions including stress and emotional exhaustion, which may lead to incivility at the workplace.

### **Despotic leadership**

Despotic leadership behaviors are fixated on attainment of supremacy, dominance, and are driven by self-interest. Such leaders always put their interests before everybody else and are manipulative, bossy, unforgiving, and arrogant (Howell & Avolio, 1992). It is useful to understand the behaviors that create DL and highlight comparisons and variances between DL and other negative leadership behaviors. Despotic leaders demand unchallenged submission and subordinates compliance and enforce it by using the more explicit and active style of leadership characterized by demanding, selfish, controlling nature and callously behaving towards others (Schilling, 2009). Such leadership focuses on

gaining and maintaining control over subordinates and maintaining a power distance among themselves and followers. Such leaders are morally corrupt, act for self-interest and have low ethical ideals (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Mehmood et al., 2023).

Unlike destructive leadership, abusive supervision, and tyrannical leadership where the main attention is on humiliating, antagonistic, and oppressive behavior towards others, DL in addition encompasses behaviors that have egoistic motives and are aimed at exploitation, manipulation and use of followers for personal gains (Naseer et al., 2016). DL not only behave in immoral and socially uncooperative ways that are untrustworthy for followers, they also act contrary to organizational interest by indulging in morally incorrect, fraudulent, and self-serving behaviors (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Tyrannical leadership unlike despotic leadership represses subordinates against their intent which can be highly beneficial in achieving organizational goals however they may achieve it by compromising and subjugating subordinates welfare (Tepper, 2000).

Because of such controlling and autocratic behavior, despotic leaders limit subordinate's contribution in decision making (Aronson, 2001) and exploit, and unfairly treat their followers. Subordinates in such exchanges with despotic leadership fail to channel their reaction towards the real culprits and offending authority (despotic leaders) and may feel that organization is the real culprit (Naseer et al., 2016; Raza et al., 2023). Such employees may reduce desired behavior and provided that leader's performance is a function of his / her follower accomplishment and that organizations are represented by leaders, employees may harm performance of both leaders and organizations (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019). Employees facing despotic leadership may withdraw creative behaviors and not indulge in citizenship behaviors to thwart the performance of despotic leaders.

### **Workplace incivility**

WI has been defined as "low intensity deviant behavior with an ambiguous intent to harm the organization" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Such behaviors violate the basic norm of common workplace respect and are fundamentally impolite and insolent without regard for others (Blau & Andersson, 2005). WI has a fundamental difference from other aggressive behaviors including deviance, theft, misuse of resources, and violence (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). WI is characterized by an unclear intent to harm and it may be because of the personality, situation, confusion, or mere coincidence while other types of aggressive behaviors have clear intent to harm the organization (Saher et al., 2021). Behaviors at workplace that are rude insensitive, and disrespectful and violate the social customs though they may not be deliberate, can be attributed as uncivil behaviors (Cortina et al., 2001; Porath & Erez, 2007).

Such behaviors are subtle and covert and given the passive and low intensity of actions, perpetrators may refute such intent and cause harm accidentally (De

Clercq et al., 2023). Such behaviors may cause hostility and ongoing interpersonal conflicts and such deeds are considered harmful treatments that employee receive at workplace as the perpetrator may be oblivious of the damage that they have caused (Raza et al., 2023; Sliter et al., 2010).

### **Despotic leadership and workplace incivility**

SET and AET are prominent theoretical frameworks to interpret the behaviors of individuals at workplace (Blau, 2017; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Based on these theories, researchers posit that negative and positive occurrences at workplace stimulate emotions and these emotions lead to depiction of behaviors at workplace. Such behaviors are two-way and reliant on behaviors of both parties (Blau, 2017). These exchanges are interpersonal in nature where actions from an individual root reaction from another. Such exchanges are both positive and negative in which behaviors are reciprocated with similar ones. Given the premise, behavior of despotic leader with an intent to take advantage, dominate, and control is reciprocated by the recipient accordingly.

Despotic leaders have been found to score low on sensitivity towards others, ethical code of conduct, and liable for one's actions and self-evaluation (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). DL exploit and unfairly treat their followers and such behaviors induce employees to reciprocate with similar behaviors. Deleterious deeds of despotic leaders are reciprocated and antagonistic behaviors will create negative responses as Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) posit that an association based on interdependent reciprocity exists between leader and follower which serve as a base of employee's behavior. Employees reciprocate with high level of trust and loyalty towards helpful leaders (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2019) and contrary to that when employees believe their leaders are narcissist, abusive and despotic, they may tend to counter with undesirable behaviors (Palmer et al., 2017).

DL use their powers mercilessly, unjustly, oppressively and arbitrarily because such leaders are dictators and driven by self-interest (Aronson, 2001). DL are completely insensitive to the needs of their followers because of which, followers feel lack of care and respect (Palmer et al., 2017) and low job satisfaction and psychological well-being (Raja et al., 2020). Based on the arguments that have been made, we posit that despotic leaders are completely driven by self-interest while completely ignoring their followers and in response to that employees with an ambiguous intent to harm show uncivil acts. So, we hypothesize.

**Hypothesis 1.** Despotic leadership has a significant impact on workplace incivility.

### **Stress**

Stress at workplace has gained importance as a main topic of investigation in medicine, organizational behavior, psychology, and mental health. Stress is found to have negative impact on mental health and performance of employees at workplace which may lead to further mental and physical complications

(Sackey & Sanda, 2009; Wright, 2007). Stress is defined as an individual's mental and physical state in reaction to the situations (stressor) that might pose an assessed hazard to that employee (Spector et al., 2000). Scholars have found substantial association of accumulated stress with anxiety (Spector et al., 2000), depression (Garst et al., 2000), burnout (Kim & Stoner, 2008), job dissatisfaction (Jex & Bliese, 1999), and use of alcohol (Liu et al., 2009). In addition to employees, stress significantly negatively impacts organizational performance due to lower productivity, increased absenteeism, turnover and accidents and increased organizational dysfunction (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994; Kim & Stoner, 2008).

### **Stress as a mediator**

Along with the physical contract, employees also undertake a psychological contract with their organization. While the written contract highlights the mutually agreed terms of operations, the psychological contract carries the implicit expectations of employees. Among these are expectations to be treated with respect and dignity at the workplace. Employees expect that they will not be treated badly and taken undue advantage of at the workplace. In addition, their leaders would give them the due respect, credit, and recognition that they deserve (Batista & Reio Jr, 2019). Despotism leadership on the contrary makes employees experience a breach of psychological contract due to which employees feel different emotions including stress.

Employees facing despotism develop negative perception of leaders due to their dominating and rude behaviors which leads them to experience stress. Employees feel emotionally violated due to exploitative behaviors of leaders and consequently loose interest at workplace manifesting in form of emotional exhaustion. Evidence including (Chaudhary & Islam, 2022; Khan et al., 2022) have proved that despotism leadership causes employee to face stressors. Stress leading to emotional exhaustion causes individuals to build a tendency to show incivility at the workplace.

Stress has been examined in relation to counterproductive and deviant behaviors in studies including (Roberts et al., 2011; Spector & Fox, 2005). Spector and Fox (2005) studied the association between stress and counterproductive behaviors. Employees register and perceive events in organization and the ones that can be classified as threatening induce emotional responses (Spector & Jex, 1998). These emotional responses lead to behaviors that can be classified as counterproductive, deviant, and uncivil. Employees show such behaviors to reduce or avoid the stressors.

Stress may also induce employees to further delve into extreme emotional experiences including emotional exhaustion. Stress is a phenomenon that triggers reactions, and these reactions may necessarily not only be evident in behaviors but can further induce emotional outbursts one of which may be emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is different from stress in aspect that stress is faced in day-to-day operations. However, when stress accumulates over period



of time, employees may feel state of being emotionally drained and worn out. Emotional exhaustion includes having a sense of anxiety, apathy, depression, hopelessness, powerlessness, irritation, and nervousness. Based on the argument made we posit.

**Hypothesis 2.** Despotic leadership has a significant impact on stress.

**Hypothesis 3.** Stress leads to emotional exhaustion.

**Hypothesis 4a.** Stress mediates despotic leadership and workplace incivility relationship.

### **Emotional exhaustion**

Emotional exhaustion affect both mental and physical health of employees due to which they feel physically fatigued and emotionally drained (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Work on EE stemmed from (Maslach, 2003) who theorized burnout grounded on three components. These three components comprise depersonalization, diminished personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion. Customer care jobs where workers show heartless and insensitive behaviors towards clients can be classified as depersonalization. Workers that undermine their abilities and give negative evaluation by considering themselves incompetent and ineffective can be classified as diminished personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is classified as “feeling of emotionally extended and exhausted by one’s work.”

Individuals experience EE when their emotional demands exceed their abilities to deal with the interpersonal dynamics at work (Maslach et al., 2001). Aggressive leaders become reason for harmful outcome for their followers including anxiety and depression (Tepper, 2000), and burnout (Aryee et al., 2002; Harvey et al., 2008; Tepper, 2000). Despotic leaders use exploitative, autocratic, and inconsiderate styles that lead to stress in their subordinates ultimately leading to burnout (Ashforth, 1994; Schilling, 2009). Stress and EE are substantially different from each other as stress is impermanent and has limited effect. Emotional exhaustion on the other hand is more rooted and has lasting impact on functioning and capability of employee (Stordeur et al., 2001).

### **Emotional exhaustion as mediator**

Burnout is significant predictor of conflict (Westman et al., 2004), and EE is one of the core factors of burnout (Johnson & Spector, 2007). Personal and emotional resources of individuals deplete because of despotic leader’s behavior, and they become emotionally exhausted. Emotional exhaustion of these subordinates is expected to increase over the period of their interaction with despotic leaders (Grandey et al., 2004). AET theory aids in explaining the relationships highlighted. As per AET theory, occurrences in the environment affect employee emotional state leading to behavior. It also proposes that positive and negative events at workplace can be distinguished and manifest in employee’s behavior accordingly (Haseeb & Shah, 2023). DL cause employees to experience negative

emotions that lead to stress may be followed by experience of EE. This ultimately leads to depiction of negative behaviors including incivility (Murad et al., 2021). Moreover, SET proposes that workplace relationships are based on cost-benefit analysis which serve as a foundation for behaviors depicted at workplace. DL focus on their personal benefits at employee's expense hinting towards negative consequences for employees (Mukarram et al., 2021). This leads to employees experiencing stress and EE due to which they may show negative behaviors at work including incivility (Saher et al., 2021). Based on the AET and SET, we propose that interaction with despotic leaders results in drainage of subordinate's energy over time which leads to emotional exhaustion. Angered and perplexed by the leader's behavior, subordinates with an unconscious or subconscious thought process depict such behaviors that violate the basic norms of interaction at workplace. So, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 5.** Despotic leadership has a significant impact on emotional exhaustion.

**Hypothesis 6.** Emotional exhaustion leads to workplace incivility.

**Hypothesis 4b.** Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and workplace incivility.

**Hypothesis 4c.** Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between stress and workplace incivility.

**Hypothesis 4d.** Stress mediates despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion relationship.

**Hypothesis 4e.** Despotic leadership and workplace incivility relationship is serially mediated by stress and emotional exhaustion.

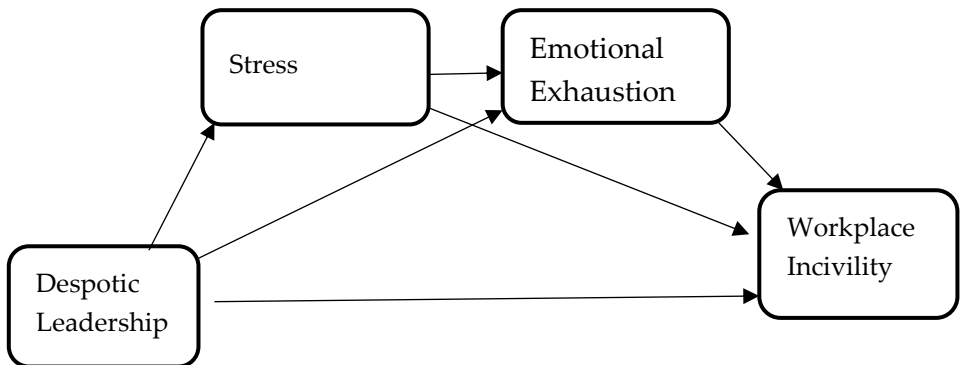


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

## Research Methodology

The current study target was to explore the impact of DL on WI with serial mediation of stress and EE. For analysis, time-lagged data was collected as it a good technique to lessen common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Data

for independent variables (IV) and stress was collected at T1 and for emotional exhaustion and incivility at T2. There was a gap of one month between T1 and T2.

## **Population and Sample**

Healthcare organizations operating in private and public sector were picked for data collection for this study. Five private and five public sector hospitals were taken for data collection. Inclusion of public and private sector hospitals aided in generalizability of the study. Moreover, service sector in Pakistan has been growing well at a rate that is above 6% and is expected to continue growing at the same pace and healthcare sector organizations have played a pivotal role in providing job opportunities. Healthcare sector has acted as a backbone especially during and post Covid and it continues to grow to meet the demands of growing population (Saqlain et al., 2020) . Service sector is also expected to grow at 7.5% as per report published by The NEWS in 2020.

Judgement sampling was employed for data collection and sample size was calculated using G\*Power. G\*power is an effective tool that can be used to calculate sample size as it draws sample based on the analysis to be carried out in the research (Raza et al., 2018, 2021, 2023). Regression analysis was carried out to test the impact IV on DV and also to test the mediation. The number of predictors was set to be 1. Medium effect size (.20),  $\alpha$  level (0.05) and high power 0.95 as suggested by (Faul et al., 2009), were the parameters set to test the sample size. Information was entered into G\*power to calculate the sample size that would be sufficient for analysis. G\*power output showed that sample of 262 would be adequate for analysis of the hypothesized model. Estimation of sample is based both on the calculation and judgment based on the requirement of research (Saunders, 2011) so, a total of 350 questionnaires were floated for data collection. The questionnaire was self-administered and google form was used to send questionnaires to the respondent and receive their responses. Data was collected from only those employees that had a minimum of six months of working experience. The participation of respondents was voluntary and consent form was added at the start of questionnaire. Also, participants were assured of confidentiality of their responses.

## **Instruments**

Well established, already existing instruments were used for data collection. For the measurement of variables, five-point Likert scale was used with “1” representing “strongly disagree” and “5” representing “strongly agree”. Instruments used for data collection were adapted from following sources.

For measuring DL, De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) six items scale was used. The items of the scale included “my supervisor is punitive, has no pity or compassion”. Parker and DeCotiis, (1983) thirteen items scale was used to measure stress. Items of the scale included “I feel fidgety or depress as a result of my job”. Emotional exhaustion was measured using Pines and Aronson (1988)

nine items scale and included items “I feel emotionally exhausted”. WI was measured using Cortina et al. (2001) seven item scale with a starting phrase “Have you witnessed, experienced or shown following behaviors at workplace?”. The items included “someone put someone down or was condescending in some way”. All the instruments used were reflective in nature (Hadi, 2022).

### **Analysis, Technique, and Software**

AMOS 22 and Statistical package for social sciences (SPSS V 23) were employed for data analysis. Structural equation modelling is used for the analysis of the proposed model. It encompasses testing of two models that are measurement and structural model as suggested by (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Measurement model is related to the investigation of connection between the latent variables and their respective items. Confirmatory factor analysis is used to test the measurement model including validity analysis, factor loadings, and reliability analysis to test the fitness of model. The next step is examination of structural model in which relationship between the proposed variables are tested. Correlation, and regression analysis were employed to test the hypotheses proposed based on structural model. Hayes (2017) PROCESS macros was used to test the direct and indirect effects for mediation.

Confirmatory factor analysis is conducted to check the uniqueness of the variables. Along with factor loadings, reliability, and validity analysis, model fit indices including comparative fit index (CFI), goodness of fit index (GFI), parsimony comparative fit index (PCFI), root mean square of approximation (RMSEA), and PCLOSE are assessed to check the fitness of model. So, for conducting CFA on measurement model, AMOS was used and for hypothesis testing Hayes (2017) PROCESS plugin for SPSS was employed.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

Based on the results of G\*power and recommendation of (Saunders, 2011), total of 350 questionnaires were floated at T1. Out of the 350 questionnaires, 303 were received back. At T2, next part of the questionnaire was floated to the individuals whose responses were received at T1. So, total 303 questionnaires were floated and 278 were received at T2. 29 questionnaires were discarded due to incomplete responses giving a total of 249 valid responses. Table 1 shows the demographics of these respondents.

*Table 1. Demographics*

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Demographics	Frequency	Percentage
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Gender	Male	148	59.4
	Female	101	40.6
Age	18-25	142	57.0
	26-40	59	23.7
	41-55	24	9.6
	> 55	24	9.6
Tenure	< 3	166	66.7
	3-5	47	18.9
	6-10	24	9.6
	> 10	12	4.8
Education	HSSC	22	8.8
	Bachelors	167	67.1
	Masters	48	19.3
	> Masters	12	4.8

Respondents included support and administrative staff working in healthcare sector. Employees working in fiancé, human resource, quality assurance, procurement, and other administrative departments were included for data collection. Out of the total 249 respondents, 148 were male with 59.4% and 101 were female with 40.6%. 142 respondents were 18 to 25 years with 57.0% while 59 were between 26 and 40 with 23.7%. 24 respondents were between 41 and 55 with 9.6% and 24 were above 55 with 9.6%. 22 respondents had a higher secondary school certificate (HSSC) with 8.8% while 167 had bachelor's degree with healthy 67.1%. 48 respondents had education of master's degree with 19.3% and 12 had degree higher than master's level with 4.8%. Demographics proved young workforce available to Pakistan with 166 having less than 3 years of experience with 66.7%. 47 respondents had 3-5 years of experience comprising 18.9% and 24 had 6 to 10 years of experience with a 9.6%. 12 respondents had experience of 10 years with 4.8 %

### Confirmatory Factor Analysis

For testing discriminant validity of the constructs, four models were developed. All items of DL, OS, WI, and EE were loaded on to a single factor for model one. For model two, DL and OS were loaded on single factor and items of EE and WI were loaded on second. Model three comprised of loading DL items of one factor, OS on second factor and EE and WI on third factor. For model four, all the items were loaded on their respective factors. As per the criteria given by (Hu & Bentler, 1999), model four gave the best fit of data  $\chi^2 / df = 1.45$ , CFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.861, and RMSEA = 0.05, PCFI = 0.850, PCLOSE = 0.067.

*Table 2. CFA Summary*

Model	$\chi^2$ (df), p	CFI	RMSEA	GFI	PCFI	PCLOSE
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Model 1 (1 Factor)	7312.211 (344), $p < 0.01$	0.31	0.28	0.453	0.511	0.000
Model 2 (2 Factor)	4580.322 (329), $p < 0.01$	0.61	0.17	0.699	0.631	0.021
Model 3 (3 Factor)	3115.71 (299), $p < 0.01$	0.71	0.13	0.751	0.723	0.321
Model 4 (4 Factor)	398.20(273) $p > 0.01$	0.97	0.05	0.861	0.850	0.067

Table 3 shows the factor loadings of latent variables along with their respective items. Factor that had loading of .6 or higher were retained (Sharma et al., 2005).

*Table 3. Factor Loadings*

Variables	Loadings			
	OC	OS	EE	WI
<b>Despotic leadership</b>				
DL1	.741			
DL2	.704			
DL3	.631			
DL4	.600			
DL5	.840			
DL6	.816			
<b>Stress</b>				
OS1		.611		
OS5		.808		
OS6		.768		
OS7		.731		
OS8		.715		
OS9		.865		
OS11		.784		
OS13		.600		
<b>Emotional exhaustion</b>				
EE1			.720	
EE2			.730	
EE3			.648	
EE4			.737	
EE5			.882	
EE6			.831	
EE7			.712	
EE8			.861	
EE9			.781	
<b>Workplace incivility</b>				
WI1				.608
WI2				.864

WI3	.752
WI4	.774
WI6	.704
WI7	.823

OC = organizational change, OS = Stress, EE = emotional exhaustion, WI = Workplace incivility

variance (MSV) as shown in table 4. The value of AVE was higher than MSV establishing discriminant validity of the constructs. Moreover, composite reliability was higher than 0.7 and AVE was also greater than 0.5 establishing good convergent validity as per (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) criterion. (Harman, 1976) single factor test was employed to examine single method variance. Variance explained by single factor was 39% which was less the threshold of 50% cut off value (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Table 4. Convergent and Discriminant Validity

	CR	AVE	MSV	DL	OS	EE	WI
DL	0.867	0.525	0.244	0.725			
OS	0.907	0.552	0.411	0.343	0.743		
EE	0.928	0.592	0.430	0.277	0.549	0.769	
WI	0.890	0.577	0.327	0.493	0.572	0.559	0.760

DL= Despotism Leadership, OS = Stress, EE = Emotional exhaustion, WI = Workplace incivility  
CR = Composite reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted, MSV = Mean shared variance

## Hypotheses Testing

Table 5 shows correlation, mean and standard deviation. Results show that DL significantly correlated with WI ( $r = .337, p < 0.01$ ). DL also significantly correlated with OS ( $r = .331, p < 0.05$ ) and EE ( $r = .258, p < 0.05$ ). Moreover, OS correlated significantly with EE ( $r = .543, p < 0.01$ ) and WI ( $r = .568, p < 0.01$ ). EE significantly correlated with WI ( $r = .597, p < 0.01$ ). The correlations supported hypothesized relationships.

Table 5. Correlation

	Mean	S.D	Skewness	Kurtosis	Age	Gender	Edu	Exp	DL	OS	EE	WI
Age <sup>a</sup>	1.68	.99			1							
Gender <sup>b</sup>	1.50	.51			-.51*	1						
Edu <sup>c</sup>	3.18	.66			.02	-.14	1					
Exp <sup>d</sup>	1.50	.85			.02	-.27	.25	1				
DL	2.51	.87	-.22	-.79	.02	-.03	.25	.01	1			

OS	2.80	.84	-.23	-.12	-.23	-.09	.10	.03	.33*	1		
EE	2.90	.97	-.14	.42	-.24	-.11	.01	.00	.25*	.54**	1	
WI	2.84	.84	-.12	-.14	.00	-.03	-.09	-.07	.37**	.56**	.59**	1

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ . DL = Despotic leadership, OS = Stress, EE = emotional exhaustion, WI = Workplace incivility, Exp = experience, Edu = education, S.D = Standard deviation a = age was coded as 1 = 25 or less, 2 = 26 to 40, 3 = 41 to 55, 4 = > 55. b = Gender was coded as 1 = male, 2 = female. c = Education was coded as 1 = senior secondary school certificate (matriculation), 2 = higher secondary school certificate (HSSC), 3 = bachelors (16 years), 4 = masters (18 years), 5 = higher, 6 = other. d = Experience was coded as 1 = less than 3 years, 2 = 4 to 5 years, 3 = 6 to 10 years, 4 = more than 4 years

Table 6 shows the results of bootstrapping with 1000 resamples. Results show that DL significantly impact WI ( $\beta = .025$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) supporting hypothesis 1 signifying that DL has a significant impact on WI. Results also show that DL significantly impact OS ( $\beta = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) supporting hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 3 is also supported as OS significantly impact EE ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, DL significantly impact EE ( $\beta = 0.44$ ,  $p < 0.03$ ) supporting notion of hypothesis 5. Lastly for direct effects, hypothesis 6 stating that EE significantly impact WI is also supported ( $\beta = 0.53$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Table 6 also shows indirect effects. Indirect effect of DL on WI through OS is significant as there is no zero between upper and lower confidence limits ( $\beta = 0.15$ , CI [0.14; 0.78]). Hence, hypothesis 4a is supported, proving the mediation of OS between DL and WI. Hypothesis 4b which states that EE mediates DL – WI relationship was also supported ( $\beta = 0.22$ , CI [0.10; 0.80]). Hypothesis 4c which states that OS effect WI through EE was also supported by results ( $\beta = 0.50$ , CI [0.60; 0.94]). Hypothesis 4d stating that OS mediates DL – EE relationship was also supported ( $\beta = 0.34$ , CI [0.08, 0.11]). Lastly, hypothesis H5e which stated that DL effects WI through a serial mediation of OS and EE was also supported ( $\beta = 0.18$ , CI [0.13; 0.22]).

Table 6. bootstrapping results for direct and indirect effects (Mediation)

Hypotheses	Paths	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	S.E.	t – statistic	P value	Boot LLCL	Boot ULCL
Direct effects							
Constant		3.38	1.43	2.53	0.03	0.34	6.43
Age		-0.34	0.21	-1.56	0.13	-0.08	0.12
Gender		-0.50	0.44	-1.14	0.27	-1.44	0.43
Education		0.003	0.29	0.01	0.99	-0.62	0.63
Experience		-0.04	0.23	-0.18	0.85	-0.53	0.44
H1	DL → WI	0.25	0.20	2.21	0.01	0.19	0.69
H2	DL → OS	0.31	0.21	2.45	0.05	0.14	0.77
H3	OS → EE	0.49	0.10	10.1	0.001	0.86	1.32
H5	DL → EE	0.44	0.09	3.40	0.03	0.17	0.25
H6	EE → WI	0.53	0.23	2.93	0.01	0.22	0.45
Indirect effects							
H4a	DL → OS → WI	0.15	0.02			0.14	0.78



H4b	DL → EE → WI	0.22	0.02	0.10	0.80
H4c	OS → EE → WI	0.50	0.09	0.60	0.94
H4d	DL → OS → EE	0.34	0.03	0.08	0.11
H5e	DL → OS → EE → WI	0.18	0.04	0.13	0.22

## Discussion

The current research examines the impact of despotic leadership on WI with mediation of stress and EE. While most of the research has focused on positive aspects of leadership, dark side has received limited research especially in the public sector organizations in Asian context despite having devastating outcomes and in some cases even the closure of organizations (Naseer et al., 2016). We integrated DL, WL, stress, and EE in affective events and social exchange theory.

Our results support the argument that DL causes WI. DL put their benefit before everything else and dominate their employees for their own benefit. Agitated by the leader's behavior, employees may feel exploited and do not know how to respond. Consequently, with an ambiguous intent, employees show uncivil behaviors supporting our hypothesis no 1. The findings support (Islam et al., 2022; Mehmood et al., 2023) suggesting that DL becomes a cause of adverse behaviors and negative behaviors. Results also prove that despotic leaders cause employee to feel stress. Employees experience different emotions due to the demanding nature of despotic leaders. These emotions manifest physical and emotional reactions that have a negative toll on employees and can be attributed as stressors providing support for hypothesis 2. The results support (Chaudhary & Islam, 2022) and, in line with the notion of AET that employees show different reactions to the extreme emotions being experienced at workplace due to despotic leaders. In addition, these emotions cause employees to have a sense of physical fatigue and emotional drain categorized as emotional exhaustion. Contrary to stress, which is temporary emotional exhaustion has a permanent toll on employees' performance as their efficiency depreciates resulting in lower organizational output and performance and results support the findings of (Nauman et al., 2018) and supporting hypothesis 3.

DL is also found to have significant impact on EE. Tyrannical, aggressive, and unethical behaviors of employees result in emotional wear and tear resulting in depleting emotional resources. Consequently, employees are in a constant state of disinterest, lack of focus, and emotional drain. Similar results have been reported by (Malik & Sattar, 2019) in their study and validates hypothesis 5. Results also proved that emotional exhaustion leads to workplace incivility. Driven by a state of emotional and physical depletion, employees are perplexed and do not know how to react and respond. Consequently, employees in their state of confusion consciously or sub consciously show such behaviors that can harm the organization. Employees may lose interest in organizations because of emotional exhaustion and due to their indifferent behaviors commit uncivil acts supporting our hypothesis 6. Similar results have been reported by (Van Jaarsveld et al., 2010) in their study.

Stress mediates DL and WI relationship. Employees working under despotic leader's experience stress because of the ardent behavior of their leaders, and they ultimately show stress. Moreover, victims of despotic leaders can also experience stress that ultimately leads them to emotional exhaustion and the notion has been supported by findings of current study and similar results have been reported in previous studies (Mubarak et al., 2023). Employees working under despotic leaders may also feel emotionally exhausted and have a permanent sense of emotional and physical depletion and withdrawal. Such employees also indulge in uncivil acts that hamper the organization. Lastly, Despotic leaders can cause employees to face stress ultimately leading to emotional exhaustion. Consequently, employees indulge in workplace incivility. The results support the premise of affective events theory stating that employees are emotional beings and show different emotions to the events occurring in the organization. The study also corroborates social exchange theory that employees react adversely and show negative behaviors towards leaders showing despotic attributes.

Leadership has always been an important determinant of organizational performance and for the same reason has received attention. Leadership's dark side has been neglected especially in healthcare sector of Asian countries and apart from study conducted by (Islam et al., 2022) has not received much attention. The study underlines adverse effect of despotic leadership and how it stimulates negative employee's behavior. Despotic leaders create discomfort, anxiety, depression, and similar emotions due to which employees consciously or subconsciously indulge in workplace incivility. Employees engaging in uncivil behaviors feel that their leaders use them for their own benefits and advantages creating frustration in employees that ultimately manifests in form of workplace incivility. It is also pertinent to mention that despotic leaders not only deteriorate employee's performance (Khan et al., 2022), but also has a negative toll on mental health. Despotism induces a sense of psychological contract breach due to which employees experience stress ultimately turning into constant sense of lack of interest which can be attributed as EE. The findings support argument of AET and SET, providing support especially within Asian context.

### **Theoretical implications**

Multiple theoretical contributions are made in current study. Its findings add to the literature available on the dark side of leadership and focuses on the negative consequences of DL as well as to literature available on despotic leadership and employee reactions to such leaders. Our study shows that DL has a negative effect on employees' physical as well as mental health. Employees working under DL are not able to focus and work properly because of stress and emotional exhaustion. Consequently, they indulge in uncivil behaviors. The findings also add to literature available on stress and how it can lead to negative behavior. Moreover, emotional exhaustion due to despotic leadership and stress is also addressed.

The current study also strives to contribute to literature on workplace incivility by highlighting the link between DL and incivility. It focuses on the process that an employee goes through while working under despotic leader and how it leads to uncivil behaviors. The study also adds to affective events theory and explains how emotions contribute to the behaviors shown at workplace. Literature on social exchange theory is also extended by giving a proposition that negative behaviors of leaders are reciprocated by negative behavior of employees which may or may not be intentional. Lastly, our study strives to explain the despotic leadership and its impact in Pakistan's cultural settings as the society ranks high in uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and power distance (Hofstede, 1984).

### **Practical implications**

The most pertinent implication of the study is that despotic leadership is harmful for the organization and employees alike. It has detrimental effects on employee performance and on organizational output. Employees experience stress and emotional exhaustion due to their leaders. Employees working in service sectors have a pivotal contribution to make as they serve as a bridge between the customers and organization. Customers judge organization and its service based on their interaction with individual representing the organization. Employee experiencing stress and burnout can create a negative image of organization because such employees are not able to focus on their tasks (Malik & Sattar, 2019; Van Jaarsveld et al., 2010).

Employees working under despotic leaders respond via uncivil behaviors which can lead to a domino effect in organization as other employees might also engage in such behaviors. Organizations can take steps to avoid appointing despotic leaders. At the same time, employees can be provided with easy access to human resource department so that they can report at such treatment at workplace. It is the responsibility of HR department to devise mechanism to monitor employees mental and physical health and take proper steps to deal individuals and factors causing stressors and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, top management including CEOs, COOs and other concerned individuals can strive to incorporate mental and physical health in company's philosophy and plan training programs aimed at building capacities to deal with the issues highlighted. Confidential information sharing mechanisms are important so that despotic leaders are not able to manipulate or harm subordinates that provide feedback regarding their negative behaviors. Proper investigations should be conducted to address grievances and checks and balances should be developed to prevent despotic leaders.

Employees engaged in workplace incivility should not be penalized; rather HR should try to identify the root causes of such behaviors and address them timely. Lastly, such culture should be developed in organizations that discourage despotic leaders and provide supports to subordinates who suffered. Relaxation, emotional and physical detachment, and exercises should be advocated in organization for employees when necessary. Devising such mechanisms can help employees to

recover from stress and emotional exhaustion and contribute constructively to organization.

### **Research Limitations and Future Directions**

The limitations of the current study can be addressed in future research. The data collected for the current research was from service sector organizations only. Future researchers can replicate the study in the manufacturing, retail, education, and other sectors to see if there are any differences due to the industry context. Data for the current study is from Pakistan. In the future, comparative analysis can be drawn between developing and developed countries for richer insights. Moreover, future studies can also collect data from patients to examine incivility experienced in health care sector. Finally, within the current study, data was collected at two intervals. Studies in the future can undertake day to day collection of data to examine the impact and variance on performance of employees.

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