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Employee disengagement: the catalytic role of leader-induced defensive cognitions and perceptual politics

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aims to attain insights into the role of destructive leadership and perceived organizational politics as catalysts for employee disengagement through the perspective of social identity theory. The research further considers employees' defensive cognitions for a comprehensive understanding of these interrelated phenomena in the workplace.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to ascertain the pertinence and contextual relevance of the proposed framework, literary review was complemented by a survey-based study encompassing 114 full-time employees purposively selected from the six systemically important banks of Pakistan.

Findings – The findings accentuate the significance of destructive leadership in inducing withdrawal behaviours among employees directly and indirectly through continuance commitment. The results also underline perceptions of politics as a significant work environment impediment amplifying employees' propensity to undergo psychological withdrawal.

Originality/value – The study contributes to strategic human resource management literature by offering an identity-based explanation for employees' disengagement, considering Pakistan's power-distant and collectivist orientation. The research further introduces an empirical novelty by postulating a total effect moderation model.

Keywords Destructive leadership, Psychological withdrawal, Defensive cognitions, Perceptions of organizational politics, Total effect moderation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Leadership is believed to be an influence relationship between leaders and followers who intend real changes and share a common purpose (Daft, 2012). While visionary leaders drive change and foster commitment towards organizational goals (Haque *et al.*, 2019), destructive leaders are unable to inspire followers, create sustainable value for organizations and often prioritize self-interests (Thoroughgood *et al.*, 2018). The growing interest in the darker side of

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leadership can be attributed to its negative impact on crucial workplace outcomes essential for organizational functioning, alongside its severe consequences for followers (Mackey *et al.*, 2021). Nonetheless, destructive leadership and its implications for individuals' behavioural outcomes in the workplace remain relatively unexplored in the Asian context (Nauman *et al.*, 2020). Destructive leadership encompasses various negative concepts such as abusive supervision, workplace bullying, toxic leadership, despotic leadership, etc (Thoroughgood *et al.*, 2018), and is purported to flourish in power-distant cultures where superiors are expected to be revered (Osei *et al.*, 2022).

Einarsen *et al.* (2007) classified destructive leadership as "the systematic and repeated behaviour 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" (p. 208). The study operationalizes destructive leadership from a culturally nuanced perspective accented by Lu *et al.* (2012), who defined the concept based on four dimensions. (1) "Corruption" – leaders' abuse of entrusted power for personal gain. (2) "Abuse of subordinates" – leaders' active intervening in, and undermining of, the work and life of employees. (3) "Excoriation of subordinates" – excessively harsh requirement of subordinates rather than treating them with benevolence and (4) "Loss of professional morality" – "creating cliques, cronyism, encouraging squeals on colleagues, and autocracy".

The impact of destructive leadership reverberates far beyond the individual leader–follower dynamics, being detrimental to employee wellbeing and prompting behaviours that undermine organizational success and erode competitive positioning (De Clercq *et al.*, 2021; Liang *et al.*, 2021). Hattab *et al.* (2022) argue that the effects of destructive leadership on employee outcomes vary across cultures. Individuals in power distant and collectivist cultures are prone to endure leaders' mistreatment due to perceived intolerance for violating accepted norms, which deters them from explicit retaliation. In this backdrop, employee outcomes frequently associated with destructive leadership include reduced employee voice (Pandey *et al.*, 2021), heightened turnover intentions (Hattab *et al.*, 2022), diminished employee performance (Nauman *et al.*, 2020) and impaired knowledge sharing (Wang *et al.*, 2023). Despite its theoretical significance, research on the impact of destructive leadership on employee disengagement remains limited. While Syed *et al.* (2022) investigated psychological detachment as an off-work coping behaviour, the effect of destructive leadership on psychological withdrawal – an on-the-job coping behaviour, requires further consideration.

Extant literature suggests that when subordinates encounter destructive leaders, they resort to a variety of coping mechanisms. Some retaliate, while others consider the prospects of withdrawal, either psychological or physical (Mackey *et al.*, 2021; Pandey *et al.*, 2021). Psychological withdrawal, indicative of employee disengagement (Bélanger *et al.*, 2015), encompasses excessive socialization, day dreaming, spending time on personal tasks or taking unsanctioned work breaks (Hanisch and Hulin, 1990). It is a condition in which an employee is physically present but mentally absent from work (Mishra *et al.*, 2016). Carpenter and Berry (2017) argued withdrawal behaviours to have two detrimental effects – loss of resources, and turnover costs, with psychological withdrawal being predictive of actual withdrawal (Khalid *et al.*, 2021). Though organizations ought to be cognizant of employees' psychological withdrawal behaviours, such behaviours are difficult to identify or foresee (Song and Lee, 2020). This accentuates the comprehension and prediction of these behaviours in contemporary applied psychological research (Huang *et al.*, 2020).

For that matter, this study delves into the perplexing question as to what prompts employee disengagement? Acknowledging the fundamental roles of emotions and cognitions in driving individuals' actions (Lee and Allen, 2002), the authors take note of the limited diversity in exploring employees' coping strategies in response to adverse leader behaviours

(Gupta *et al.*, 2020). More specifically, emphasis is laid on the less-explored cognitive aspects rather than the affect-driven mechanisms predominantly highlighted in existing literature, see for example (Huang *et al.*, 2020; Jiang and Qu, 2022; Pandey *et al.*, 2021). The authors, therefore, present a contrarian perspective that considers withdrawal behaviours as conscious and calculated responses based on employees' cognitive evaluations.

By drawing on a quantitatively designed survey-based study, recruiting a sample of 114 full-time employees from the banking sector of Pakistan, the authors argue that the broader cultural context has a profound impact on employees' proclivity to withdraw (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). The power dynamics coupled with a collectivist orientation likely prompt employees to retaliate destructive leaders' mistreatment indirectly by exercising withdrawal as a coping strategy, allowing them to discreetly vent inner frustration (Nauman *et al.*, 2020). This accentuates the pertinence of continuance commitment as a potent factor governing employee behaviours. Continuance commitment – a distinct facet of organizational commitment, reminiscent of defensive cognitions (Islam *et al.*, 2023; Jain *et al.*, 2009), refers to an employee's assessment of the costs of departure from the organization (Allen and Meyer, 1990). It can be construed as employees' psychological assessment encompassing considerations of accumulated resources and perceived low mobility, principally shaping their behavioural responses (Olfat *et al.*, 2020). Employees with a continuance commitment dominant profile are therefore more susceptible to defensive behaviours (Vandenberghe *et al.*, 2011), and may avoid standing up to destructive leaders with the belief that their behaviours would be seen as intolerance and against the accepted organizational norms, especially in power distant and collectivist societies (Hattab *et al.*, 2022).

The authors further argue that perceptions of a political work environment cast a shadow on employees' choice of behavioural responses (Malik *et al.*, 2019; Narayanan and Moon, 2022), for employees perceive politics as an external threat to their identity and wellbeing (Rosen *et al.*, 2016). Perceptual politics manifest in employees' subjective evaluations about the extent to which their work environment is characterised by co-workers and supervisors who demonstrate self-serving behaviours (Ferris *et al.*, 2019). Such perceptions are particularly salient in collectivist cultures, where hierarchies and social norms are revered (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010; Narayanan and Moon, 2022). Though perceptions of politics, categorized as a stressor, have often been associated to a multitude of work consequences (De Clercq *et al.*, 2021) ranging from job satisfaction to commitment, trust, well-being and so on (Ferris *et al.*, 2019), the study examines the overarching influence of perceptual politics as a work environment impediment through a total effect moderation model. In so doing, the authors draw on the social identity theory for a deeper understanding of the interplay of stressors and employees' cognitive evaluations in eliciting withdrawal as a coping strategy in Pakistan's financial sector perspective, considering the research call by Turek (2022).

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Unlike conservation of resources theory or the job demands-resources model frequently adopted by researchers for explicating employee outcomes, social identity theory reflects upon the social dynamics of organizational life as the guiding principles for individuals' behaviours. The social identity theory underscores individuals' innate tendency to associate themselves to various social categories based upon certain affiliations such as cultural, religious, organizational or group membership, etc (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). This cognitive categorization enables them to define and reflect upon their self-concept (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). The theory is premised on three principles: Individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity, a positive social identity relies on favourable comparisons between in-groups and relevant outgroups, and when individuals consider their social identity to be unsatisfactory, they are inclined to leave their group and join some other group

considered positively distinct. While partly diverging from Tajfel and Turner (1986), the authors believe that apprehensions of perceived costs coupled with cultural constraints, compel employees to stay put and yield to unsatisfactory or deficient social identity, rather than switching over.

The theory further implies that what people believe and the way they believe as members of social groups guides their attitudes and behaviours in social systems (Korte, 2007). In tandem, Decoster *et al.* (2013) maintain that the degree to which employees identify with their organization determines how they are likely to react to exploitative supervision. Social identity theory also offers an explanation for the influence of organizational climate, since the extent to which employees identify with their organizations depends on their perceptions of the climate (Pandey *et al.*, 2021). In highly political work environments, employees often fear that their performance may go unrecognized, and rewards may be distributed based on group membership, nepotism and subjective criteria rather than objective factors (Cropanzano *et al.*, 1997). Relying on Ashforth and Lee (1990), the authors contend that employees experiencing a depletion of identity and self-worth owing to stressors – destructive leadership and perceptual politics, resort to "defensiveness" and may push themselves into withdrawal as a means to cope with the inflicted stress while preserving their social and self-image.

Destructive leadership and psychological withdrawal

"Dark leadership" literature denotes it as a set of self-centred attitudes, motivations and behaviours that act as work stressors, with serious repercussions for organizations (Jabbar *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, work stressors are assumed to affect employees' defensive cognitions instigating withdrawal behaviours (Ashforth and Lee, 1990). In essence, employee exploitation has a significant relationship with withdrawal (Malik *et al.*, 2022), since destructive behaviours from leaders entail psychological costs (Tepper *et al.*, 2017), and prolonged exposure to such behaviours fosters negative sentiments among employees, leading to a loss of self-worth, making them disengage (Einarsen *et al.*, 2016). The authors, therefore, believe that indulging in psychological withdrawal behaviours allows employees to discreetly attenuate the psychological stress inflicted by destructive leaders (Huang *et al.*, 2020), while conserving their social and self-image.

H1. Destructive leadership positively influences psychological withdrawal.

Destructive leadership and continuance commitment

Leadership styles are purported to have pervasive implications for employees' commitment (Al-Hussami *et al.*, 2018) and organizational sustainability alike (Jabbar *et al.*, 2020). Employees can develop multiple work-related commitments considering the multidimensional nature of the concept (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001). Positive work-related experiences tend to foster affective commitment, whereas continuance commitment is typically associated with lack of investments and alternative options (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). Notably, leaders' destructive behaviours act as stressors that place a cognitive burden on employees (Osei *et al.*, 2022). Specifically, these stress-inducing behaviours compel employees to consume more mental energy to cope with the situation, thereby undermining their sense of belonging and identification with the organization. The authors, therefore, propose that upon encountering destructive leaders, employees' sense of belonging and obligation towards their organization wane owing to perceived depletion of their identity and deterioration of their organizational membership, whereas apprehensions of perceived costs start taking precedence in their work patterns and attitudinal responses.

H2. Destructive leadership positively influences continuance commitment.

Continuance commitment and psychological withdrawal

While each commitment component signifies a psychological state with implications for whether or not to continue membership of the organization, the nature of each of these states differs (Wasti, 2005). In particular, the probability of desirable job outcomes is higher with high affective or normative commitment, whereas such a probability is low with continuance commitment. Employees with a continuance commitment dominant profile are therefore more likely to undergo psychological withdrawal because they are not emotionally attached to the organization, yet cannot leave for the costs entailing departure (Islam *et al.*, 2023; Somers, 2009). Jain *et al.* (2009) argue that continuance commitment belongs to the cognitive domain of individuals' personality, and is negatively linked with employee wellbeing, in contrast to affective and normative commitment, reminiscent of a positive affective mental state. Taking a pragmatic view, the authors postulate that the predictive efficacy of continuance commitment is stronger in relation to employees' psychological withdrawal due to deficient comparisons compounded by a defensive frame of mind.

H3. Continuance commitment positively influences psychological withdrawal.

The mediating role of continuance commitment

Management style determines the level of employee commitment, while exploitation by leaders stimulates negative employee behaviours (Aşçı, 2020). Employees facing destructive leaders, usually adopt the safest recourse available (Nauman *et al.*, 2020) and opt for avoidance strategies as against confrontational one's (Wu *et al.*, 2018). This phenomenon can be attributed to two main factors. First, employees adopt a defensive demeanour to conserve their social and self-image while navigating through the aversive situation (Ashforth and Lee, 1990). Second, it reflects a desire to avoid shame and loss of face, which is of particular significance in Pakistan's power-distant and collectivist society, where hierarchies and compliance are emphasized (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010; Narayanan and Moon, 2022). Factors such as individuals' employability and job market conditions may further compel a disgruntled employee to stay put and deal with the destructive leader, rather than exiting the organization (Pandey *et al.*, 2021). In coherence with the social identity theory, the authors speculate that upon perceiving discrimination in contrast to outgroups or being exploited by their leaders, employees undergo a consistent evaluation of their employment relationship, submit to passive compliance and search for salvation through withdrawal as an implicit mode of defence.

H4. Continuance commitment mediates the positive relationship between destructive leadership and psychological withdrawal.

The moderating role of perceptions of organizational politics

Politics is inevitable in organizations owing to the ambiguity arising from intense competition and rapid technological changes (Lawong *et al.*, 2018). However, employee reactions to politics vary, influenced by distinct economic and organizational conditions that shape their perceptions and subsequent behaviours (Hsiung *et al.*, 2011). It is therefore important to acknowledge the influence of internal and external factors on individuals' manner of coping (Pandey *et al.*, 2021). In this backdrop, destructive behaviours by leaders contribute to an intensification of the political climate in organizations (Ferris *et al.*, 2019). Within such an environment, employees' ability to cope with demands gets exceeded, and negative effects appear in individuals' outcomes (Meisler *et al.*, 2019; Turek, 2022). Malik *et al.* (2019) speculated that perceptions of organizational politics may serve as a significant work environment impediment in Pakistan. This is because the uncertainty and ambiguity associated to a politically charged environment (Kacmar and Ferris, 1991) places a cognitive burden on employees, pushing them into a defensive frame of mind (Ashforth and Lee, 1990),

which ultimately manifests in destructive attitudinal and behavioural responses (Bedi and Schat, 2013). In this vein, Baloch *et al.* (2017) held that perceptions of organizational politics increase the likelihood of employees' involvement in potentially questionable behaviours. It can thus reasonably be inferred that driven by the perceptions of favouritism and exploitation on the part of significant others, employees consider their esteem and sense of self depleted, losing the perceived salience of their identity and sense of belonging with the organization (De Clercq *et al.*, 2021). This, in turn, intensifies the employees' tendency to withdraw (Livne-Ofer *et al.*, 2019), for they can neither identify with, nor can they exit the organization in cognizance of the associated costs.

H5. Perceptions of organizational politics (Figure 1) moderate the mediated relationship between destructive leadership and psychological withdrawal, such that employees' propensity to withdraw will be stronger with higher perceptions of politics than low.

Conceptual framework

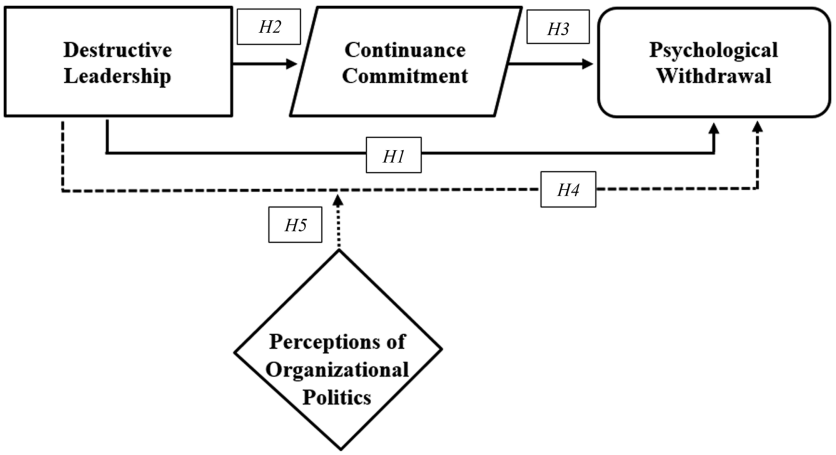


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

Source(s): Authors' own work

Equations for the model

The equations for testing the hypothesized total effect moderation model in line with Edwards and Lambert (2007) are:

$$\boldsymbol{PW} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(DL) + \beta_2(CC) + \beta_3(OP) + \beta_4(DL\,x\,OP) + \beta_5(CC\,x\,OP) + \varepsilon$$
$$\boldsymbol{CC} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1(DL) + \alpha_2(OP) + \alpha_3(DL\,x\,OP) + \varepsilon$$

Method

Sample

In order to ascertain the pertinence of the proposed framework in Pakistan's financial sector context, successive surveys were conducted with employees working in the six systemically important banks, that is (1) Habib Bank Ltd., (2) Muslim Commercial Bank, (3) National Bank of Pakistan, (4) United Bank Ltd., (5) Allied Bank Ltd. and (6) Bank of Punjab. Financial

institutions are characterised as systemically important if "their distress or disorderly failure would cause significant disruption to the financial system and economic activity due to their size, complexity and systemic interconnectedness" (Brühl, 2017), thus providing a compelling backdrop for this research.

Participants

The participants for the study encompassed 114 full-time employees from the systemically important banks functioning in the twin cities of Pakistan. For determining a rational sample size with adequate statistical power, an a-priori power analysis was conducted with a random-predictors model through G*Power v_3.1 (Faul *et al.*, 2009). "Power" was calculated for a medium effect size recommended for one-tailed multiple regression analyses ($f^2 = 0.13$), with two predictors, a significance level of 0.05, and a target power of 0.95. The power analysis yielded a minimum recommended sample size of 111 participants, with the critical R^2 value being 0.053. For enhanced generalizability, the respondents for the study were selected purposively with their minimum profile being assistant managers.

Measures

For operationalizing qualitative concepts, duly authenticated measures were utilized, and the research instrument was anchored on a five (05) point Likert scale. The eight (08) item scale by Lehman and Simpson (1992) was employed to assess *psychological withdrawal*. Sample items were "I often spend work time on personal matters", "I frequently experience thoughts of being absent" and "I leave workstation for unnecessary reasons".

Destructive leadership was assessed through the twenty (20) item scale by Lu *et al.* (2012). Sample items were "My superior abuses his power for personal gain", "My superior shows no understanding of or sympathy with the actual difficulties of subordinates", "My superior is habitual of interference in subordinates' interpersonal relationships", "My superior discriminates among subordinates" and "My superior encourages squeals on colleagues".

For operationalizing *continuance commitment*, eight (08) items from the organizational commitment scale by Allen and Meyer (1990) were adopted. Sample items were "Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire" and "I feel that I have too few options to consider leaving this organization".

Perceptions of organizational politics was measured by utilizing the twelve (12) item scale by Kacmar and Ferris (1991). Sample items were "Favouritism not merit gets people ahead in this organization" and "No one crosses the influential group in this organization".

Data collection and common method biases

For the study, primary data was collected through successive self-administered questionnaire surveys from January, 2023 to July, 2023 in order to mitigate potential biases (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). Data on destructive leadership was collected at Time-1, while data on continuance commitment was collected at Time-2, whereas data on psychological withdrawal and organizational politics was collected at Time-3 with a lag of two months each. Reverse coded questions were also included to curb the straight lining tendency, and attain objective responses (Jordan and Troth, 2019).

In order to attenuate the threat of low response rate and respondent attrition, 170 questionnaires were distributed in sealed envelopes in liaison with the human resource departments of the banks. Respondent attrition resulted in 56 questionnaires being discarded (13 at T-1, 17 at T-2 and 26 at T-3), and analysis was carried out on a dataset containing 114 observations. The last four (04) digits of the respondents' mobile numbers were utilized as matching codes for tracking their responses.

Results

Descriptive and correlation analysis

The measures of location and spread confirmed that the data fell within acceptable ranges. The descriptive and correlation coefficients are presented at Table 1.

Control variables

Gender, age and tenure of employment were taken as control variables, considering the literary consensus that such demographic factors influence employees' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours (Pandey *et al.*, 2021).

Assessment of measurement model

The measurement model was assessed by applying PLS-SEM in SmartPLS v_4.0. Initially, individual indicator reliability for the reflective indictors was corroborated. The indicators reflected adequate loadings at large, and all items were retained to avoid compromising the content validity, considering that loadings approached the general threshold (Hair *et al.*, 2019; Hulland, 1999). The final fitted model is presented at Figure 2. The internal consistency reliability concurrently verified through Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability measure yielded above par values, with α and CR values > 0.7 (Table 2). Likewise, the Average Variance Extracted measure indicated sufficient evidence for convergent validity, with AVE values for all constructs being >0.5 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). The HTMT ratios further accorded evidence as to the measures being discriminant with ratios below the threshold of 0.85 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015).

Assessment of structural model

The structural model was tested through the bootstrapping technique with 5,000 samples. The standard criteria including coefficient of determination (R^2), and significance tests for the acceptance or rejection of hypotheses were adhered. The hypothesized model's R^2 value of 0.453 was significant considering the critical R^2 value of 0.053 extracted through power analysis.

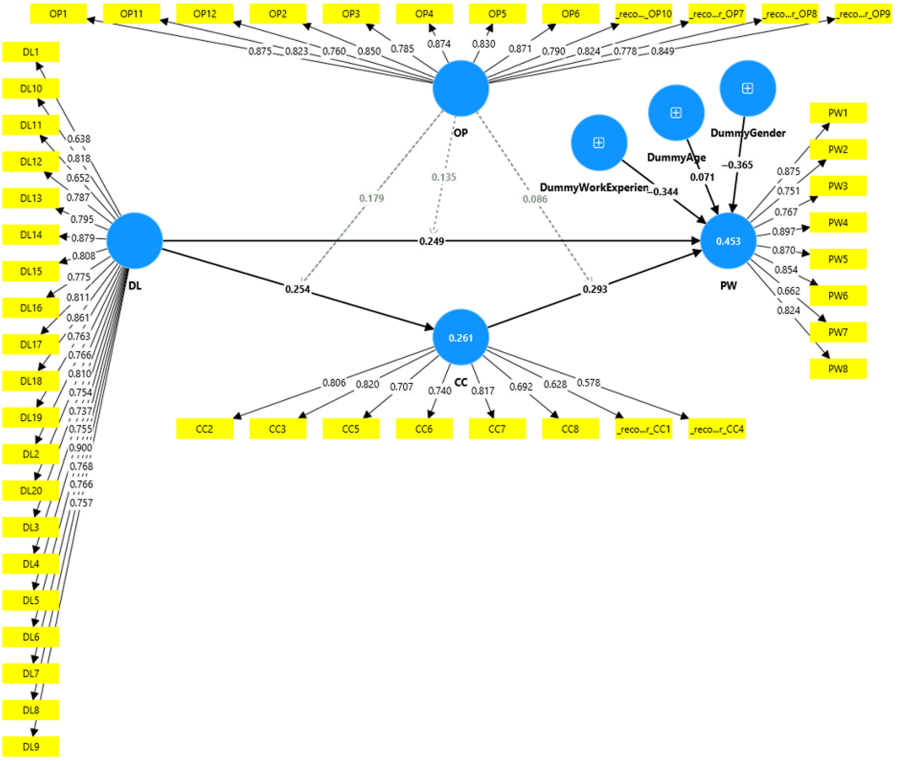
The analysis reflected that destructive leadership positively influences employees' psychological withdrawal behaviours at 95% CI (β 0.249, *STDEV* 0.123, *t* 2.015, *LLCI* 0.036, *ULCI* 0.445), in line with H1 (DL → PW). The results further provided that destructive leadership positively influences continuance commitment (DL → CC) – (β 0.254, *STDEV* 0.092, *t* 2.766, *LLCI* 0.112, *ULCI* 0.417), and continuance commitment positively influences

Concept	*M*	*SD*	*SK*	*KT*	GEN	AG	TEN	PW	DL	CC	OP
GEN	1.20	0.40	1.50	0.27	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
AG	3.47	1.29	0.91	0.61	−0.06	–	–	–	–	–	–
TEN	3.51	1.20	0.47	0.33	−0.10	0.93**	–	–	–	–	–
PW	2.67	0.91	0.54	−0.85	−0.02	−0.09	−0.18*	–	–	–	–
DL	2.61	0.98	0.77	−0.68	−0.04	−0.24**	−0.31**	0.52**	–	–	–
CC	3.59	0.78	0.06	−0.92	−0.20*	−0.23**	−0.22**	0.45**	0.39**	–	–
OP	3.46	0.90	−0.66	0.20	−0.17*	0.03	−0.08	0.44**	0.54**	0.34**	–

Note(s): $N = 114$. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; *M*, mean; *SD*, standard deviation; *SK*, skewness; *KT*, kurtosis; GEN, gender; AG, age; TEN, tenure; PW, psychological withdrawal; DL, destructive leadership; CC, continuance commitment; OP, perceptions of organizational politics

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 1.
Descriptive and correlation coefficients



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 2.
The final fitted model

Concept	α	*CR*	*AVE*	CC	DL	OP	PW
CC	0.873	0.880	0.530	–	–	–	–
DL	0.966	0.970	0.612	0.451	–	–	–
OP	0.958	0.965	0.683	0.381	0.569	–	–
PW	0.927	0.940	0.666	0.507	0.554	0.470	–

Note(s): $N = 114$. α, Cronbach's alpha; *CR*, composite reliability; *AVE*, average variance extracted; HTMT, Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio; CC, continuance commitment; DL, destructive leadership; OP, perceptions of organizational politics; PW, psychological withdrawal
Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 2.
Reliability and validity statistics

psychological withdrawal behaviours among employees (CC → PW) – (β 0.293, *STDEV* 0.102, *t* 2.876, *LLCI* 0.092, *ULCI* 0.432), thus confirming H2 and H3 respectively.

The analysis supported H4 (DL → CC → PW) – continuance commitment explains the relationship between destructive leadership and employees' psychological withdrawal (β 0.074, *STDEV* 0.034, *t* 2.174, *LLCI* 0.019, *ULCI* 0.129). The total effect was also statistically significant (β 0.323, *STDEV* 0.120, *t* 2.689, *LLCI* 0.112, *ULCI* 0.511), which hints towards a complementary partial mediation.

The total effect moderation as per H5 – OP × (DL → CC → PW) was supported since the lower and the upper limit confidence intervals did not include a zero, with the standardized

coefficient for the total effect moderation path being positive (β 0.052, *STDEV* 0.028, *t* 1.863, *LLCI* 0.008, *ULCI* 0.098), albeit the low effect size. The analysis accorded reasonable grounds as to the pertinence of defensive cognitions and the overarching influence of perceptions of organizational politics in conditioning employees' attitudes and behaviours in the systemically important banks of Pakistan. The summary of hypotheses' results is presented at Table 3.

Simple slope analysis

The moderation on specific paths revealed incremental effects, complementary to the total effect moderation path, as demonstrated by the simple slope analysis with ±1 SD *(Ref:* Figures 3–5). The proposition that perceptual politics serve as an environmental impediment was thus ratified – such perceptions amplify the employees' propensity to submit to defensiveness and disengage upon encountering destructive leaders.

The slopes at ± 1 SD as per Figure 3 illustrated an exponentially positive effect of the interaction term (OP × DL) on continuance commitment – OP × DL → CC. This indicates that the influence of destructive leadership on continuance commitment was stronger for employees with higher perceptions of politics (β 0.179, *STDEV* 0.072, *t* 2.475, *LLCI* 0.054, *ULCI* 0.289). Likewise, Figure 4 reflected an incremental effect of the interaction term (OP × CC) on psychological withdrawal – OP × CC → PW, that is continually committed employees with higher perceptions of politics were more likely to disengage compared to those with lower perceptions (β 0.086, *STDEV* 0.051, *t* 1.656, *LLCI* 0.010, *ULCI* 0.277).

In Figure 5, the slopes revealed a positive impact of the interaction term (OP × DL) on psychological withdrawal – employees' proclivity to disengage increased incrementally with higher perceptions of politics when faced with destructive leadership (β 0.135, *STDEV* 0.045, *t* 2.978, *LLCI* 0.083, *ULCI* 0.277). The positive total effect moderation path coefficient presented in Table 3 – (β 0.052, *STDEV* 0.028, *t* 1.863, *LLCI* 0.008, *ULCI* 0.098) aligned with the slope analyses, confirming the catalytic role of perceptual politics as a significant work environment impediment.

Discussion

The study unveils destructive leadership, perceived organizational politics, and psychological withdrawal as pervasive issues in the systemically important banks of Pakistan. The research not only sheds light on these critical workplace phenomena but also highlights the catalytic role played by defensive cognitions in inducing withdrawal behaviours, particularly among employees with higher perceptions of politics, in response to the research call by Turek (2022).

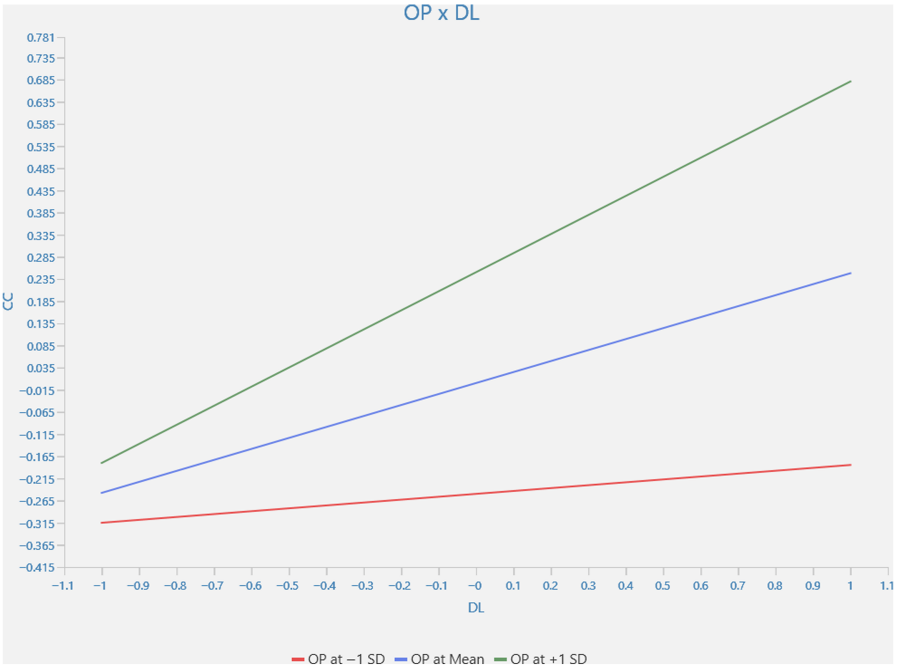
The premise of the study is that destructive behaviours by leaders coupled with cultural constraints trigger defensive attitudes in employees. This defensiveness compels employees

	Path	B	STDEV	*t*	5.0%	95.0%
H1	DL → PW	0.249	0.123	2.015	0.036	0.445
H2	DL → CC	0.254	0.092	2.766	0.112	0.417
H3	CC → PW	0.293	0.102	2.876	0.092	0.432
H4	DL → CC → PW	0.074	0.034	2.174	0.019	0.129
H5	OP × (DL → CC → PW)	0.052	0.028	1.863	0.008	0.098

Note(s): $N = 114$. DL, destructive leadership; PW, psychological withdrawal; CC, continuance commitment; OP, perceptions of organizational politics

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 3.
Hypotheses' results



Note(s): $N = 114$. OP, perceptions of organizational politics; DL, destructive leadership; CC, continuance commitment; PW, psychological withdrawal
Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 3.
Simple slope analysis – OP × DL → CC

to stay put and submit to unsatisfactory or deficient social identity, pushing them into withdrawal (Ashforth and Lee, 1990). Concurrently, perceptions of organizational politics amplify the employees' propensity to disengage, for they can neither identify with nor exit the organization in cognizance of the associated costs.

Considering the theoretical principles established by Tajfel and Turner (1986), the study implies that employees undergo a consistent evaluation of their employment relationship upon being exploited or discriminated by their leaders in contrast to outgroups. Despite the loss of perceived salience of their social identity and sense of belonging with their organization owing to deficient comparisons, employees do not leave their group or organization for that matter, rather they submit to defensiveness and tend to search for salvation through withdrawal. This is consistent with the proposition that superiors' exploitative behaviours inflict psychological distress, serving as a catalyst for employees' engagement in deviant behaviours contingent on the extent of their identification with organizations (De Clercq *et al.*, 2021).

The literary review and the ensuing data analyses substantiate the idea that perceptions of politics serve as a perceptual impediment, which exacerbates the cognitive burdens on employees (Meisler *et al.*, 2019). The framework is somewhat complementary to Shamsudin *et al.* (2023), who noted that leader favouritism can instigate withdrawal behaviours among employees, with the adverse influence being stronger for those who believe that it would be difficult for them to find an alternate employment. The study also corresponds in principle to Livne-Ofer *et al.* (2019), who maintained that employee exploitation typically fosters a negative environment stimulating withdrawal behaviours.

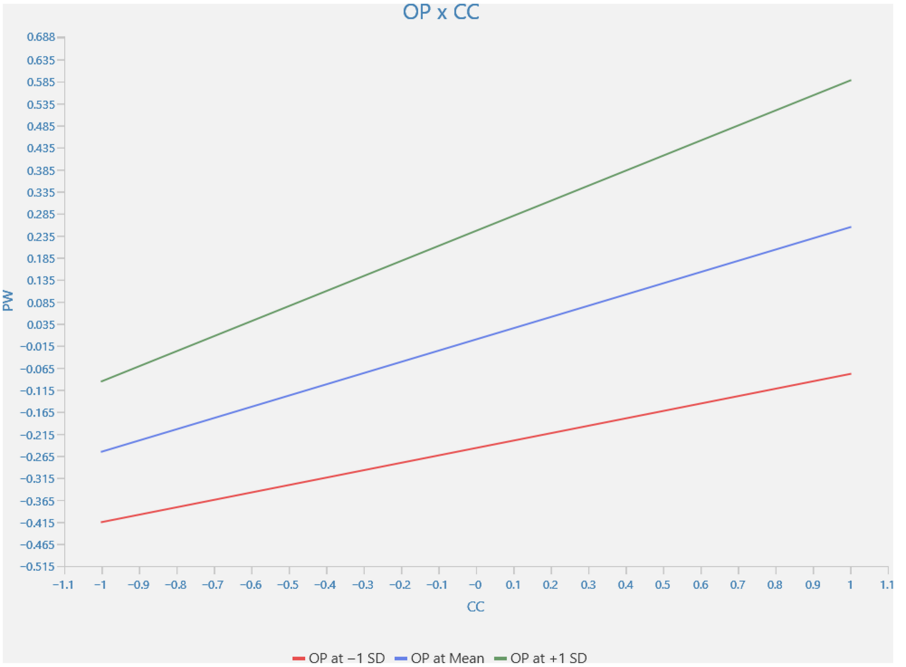


Figure 4.
Simple slope analysis – OP × CC → PW

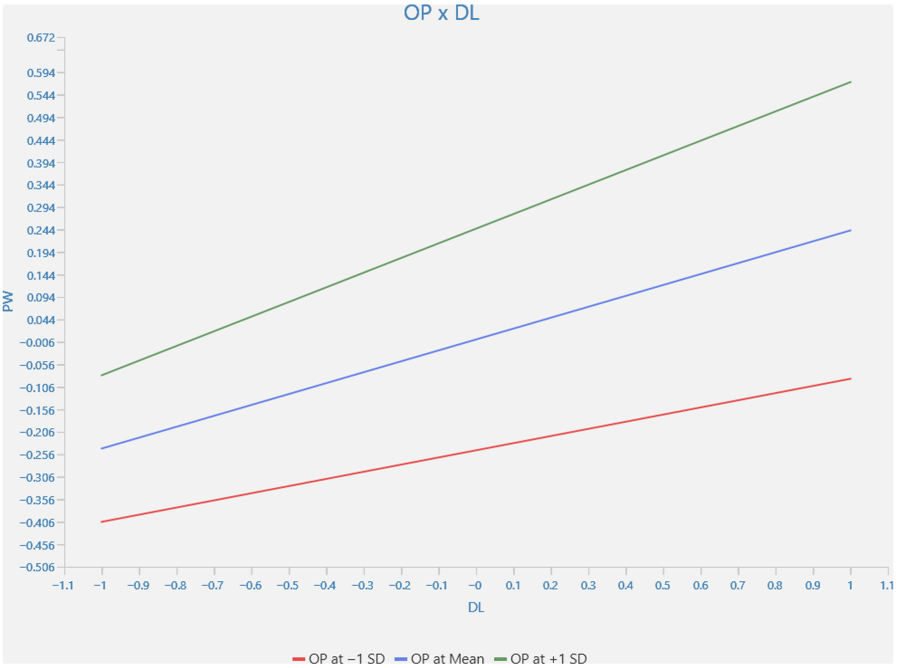
Note(s): $N = 114$. OP, perceptions of organizational politics; DL, destructive leadership; CC, continuance commitment; PW, psychological withdrawal
Source(s): Authors' own work

Theoretical contributions

The study enhances the existing body of knowledge by delineating a novel causal mechanism through a total effect moderation model. The model, anchored in social identity theory, caters to Pakistan's unique cultural and contextual orientation. This has prospects for a nuanced understanding of employees' indulgence in withdrawal behaviours in power-distant and collectivist cultures, where defensive cognitions tend to assume a predominant role in modelling employees' work patterns and behavioural responses (Islam *et al.*, 2023).

The authors further emphasize employees' cognitive evaluations as catalysts for negative behaviours as against the emotion-centric perspectives accented by existing research (Huang *et al.*, 2020; Jiang and Qu, 2022; Pandey *et al.*, 2021). By doing so, the study promulgates a more rational and empirically warranted explanation for employees' psychological withdrawal behaviours when confronted with stressors (Turek, 2022). This departure is significant as it theorizes workplace behaviours to be driven by employees' conscious and informed decisions rather than spontaneous choices as purported under the existing emotion focused delineations.

The authors postulated a total effect moderation model in order to account for the overarching influence of perceptual politics as an environmental impediment having an interactive bearing on employees' attitudinal and behavioural manifestations. To the best of the authors' knowledge, total effect moderation within a cognitive framework has not previously been tested. This study, therefore, adds diversity to the discourse on employees' coping strategies to deal with negative leader behaviours (Gupta *et al.*, 2020).



Note(s): $N = 114$. OP, perceptions of organizational politics; DL, destructive leadership; CC, continuance commitment; PW, psychological withdrawal
Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 5.
Simple slope analysis – OP × DL → PW

Practical implications

The study offers some actionable insights for practitioners as well. The research underscores the critical role of defensive cognitions in shaping employee responses. To mitigate withdrawal behaviours, organizations should prioritize leadership development and stress management programs (Huang *et al.*, 2020). This may significantly reduce the trigger of defensive attitudes in employees.

Organizations also need to prioritize the accountability of individuals who exhibit negative behaviours. To this effect, developing and enforcing a code of conduct that explicitly outlines acceptable and unacceptable behaviours at the workplace is imperative. Structural changes and promotion of an open organizational culture can further contribute to mitigating implicit adverse behaviours among employees (Deniz *et al.*, 2013).

To foster a conducive environment and mitigate adverse behavioural outcomes, institution of robust evaluation processes complemented by effective grievance redressal systems is inevitable. Measures such as 360-degree feedback, reverse appraisals and safeguards for whistle blowers need to be put in place. These processes promote transparency, accountability and ethical behavior within the organizational framework.

By recognizing the complex interplay of attitudes and behaviours, and the cultural context in which they occur, organizations can promote a harmonious and resilient work environment, instrumental in mitigating withdrawal behaviours, concurrently improving employee and organizational outcomes (Al Jisr *et al.*, 2020). On an interpersonal level, leaders need to consider provisioning of performance feedback to enhance employee experiences and

deter withdrawal behaviours. Organizational managers ought to actively highlight favourable aspects during one-on-one feedback, recognize efforts and completed work to foster a positive atmosphere (Jiang and Qu, 2022).

Limitations

Despite undertaking procedural remedies to mitigate potential biases (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012), such as using different measurement occasions and elaboration of the purpose of the study through an instruction sheet beforehand (Jordan and Troth, 2019), the use of observational data constrained the inference of causality under the study. This therefore accentuates carefully designed experiments by future researchers for a more robust research design. Another significant challenge concerns the prospects of reverse causality. Despite relying on authentic literature for hypothesizing the relationships among destructive leadership, continuance commitment and psychological withdrawal – destructive leadership positively influences defensive attitudes and behaviours, alternative models cannot be ruled out. It could be argued that leaders might demonstrate destructive behaviours to employees who are particularly vulnerable and lack other options, suggesting that continuance commitment could lead to destructive leadership. This perspective offers a reasonable avenue for further exploration by future researchers; however, the authors could not find unequivocal theoretical or empirical support for reverse causality against the hypothesized model.

Future research directions

The primary objective of the current study was to present a systematically integrated model for an enhanced understanding of the relationship between destructive leadership and employees' disengagement. The proposed research model can be validated for diverse cultural contexts. The model's applicability can further be extended to validate other covert employee behaviours as outcomes while utilizing other potential mediating variables. Moreover, researchers can utilize a different theoretical perspective to elucidate employees' engagement in withdrawal behaviours. The overarching influence of individuals' personality traits on their tendency to submit to defensiveness and consequent responses could also be explored under the five-factor model of personality. More importantly, a comparative analysis of the phenomena can be conducted across public and private sector financial institutions, considering the influence of organizational culture. Complementing quantitative findings with qualitative methodologies, such as interviews or focused group discussions, can provide nuanced insights into employees' perceptions and experiences. In conclusion, future research in this domain has the potential to further enrich researchers' comprehension of the interplay between stressors and employee behaviours.

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