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

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

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 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

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3 accented by [Lu et al. \(2012\)](#), who defined the concept based on four dimensions. *i.* ‘Corruption’
4 - leaders’ abuse of entrusted power for personal gain. *ii.* ‘Abuse of subordinates’ - leaders’
5 active intervening in, and undermining of, the work and life of employees. *iii.* ‘Excoriation of
6 subordinates’ - excessively harsh requirement of subordinates rather than treating them with
7 benevolence, and *iv.* ‘Loss of professional morality’ - “creating cliques, cronyism, encouraging
8 squeals on colleagues, and autocracy”.

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

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27 Extant literature suggests that when subordinates encounter destructive leaders, they
28 resort to a variety of coping mechanisms. Some retaliate, while others consider the prospects
29 of withdrawal, either psychological or physical ([Mackey et al., 2021](#); [Pandey et al., 2021](#)).
30 Psychological withdrawal, indicative of employee disengagement ([Bélanger et al., 2015](#)),
31 encompasses excessive socialization, day dreaming, spending time on personal tasks, or taking
32 unsanctioned work breaks ([Hanisch & Hulin, 1990](#)). It is a condition in which an employee is
33 physically present but mentally absent from work ([Mishra et al., 2016](#)). [Carpenter and Berry](#)
34 [\(2017\)](#) argued withdrawal behaviours to have two detrimental effects - loss of resources, and
35 turnover costs, with psychological withdrawal being predictive of actual withdrawal ([Khalid et](#)
36 [al., 2021](#)). Though organizations ought to be cognizant of employees’ psychological
37 withdrawal behaviours, such behaviours are difficult to identify or foresee ([Song & Lee, 2020](#)).
38 This accentuates the comprehension and prediction of these behaviours in contemporary
39 applied psychological research ([Huang et al., 2020](#)).

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42 For that matter, this study delves into the perplexing question as to what prompts
43 employee disengagement? Acknowledging the fundamental roles of emotions and cognitions
44 in driving individuals’ actions ([Lee & Allen, 2002](#)), the authors take note of the limited
45 diversity in exploring employees’ coping strategies in response to adverse leader behaviours
46 ([Gupta et al., 2020](#)). More specifically, emphasis is laid on the less-explored cognitive aspects
47 rather than the affect-driven mechanisms predominantly highlighted in existing literature, see
48 for example ([Huang et al., 2020](#); [Jiang & Qu, 2022](#); [Pandey et al., 2021](#)). The authors, therefore,
49 present a contrarian perspective that considers withdrawal behaviours as conscious and
50 calculated responses based on employees’ cognitive evaluations.

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53 By drawing on a quantitatively designed survey-based study, recruiting a sample of 114
54 full-time employees from the banking sector of Pakistan, the authors argue that the broader
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3 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
4 retaliate destructive leaders' mistreatment indirectly by exercising withdrawal as a coping
5 strategy, allowing them to discreetly vent inner frustration ([Nauman et al., 2020](#)). This
6 accentuates the pertinence of continuance commitment as a potent factor governing employee
7 behaviours. Continuance commitment – a distinct facet of organizational commitment,
8 reminiscent of defensive cognitions ([Islam et al., 2023](#); [Jain et al., 2009](#)), refers to an
9 employee's assessment of the costs of departure from the organization ([Allen & Meyer, 1990](#)).
10 It can be construed as employees' psychological assessment encompassing considerations of
11 accumulated resources and perceived low mobility, principally shaping their behavioural
12 responses ([Olfat et al., 2020](#)). Employees with a continuance commitment dominant profile are
13 therefore more susceptible to defensive behaviours ([Vandenberghe et al., 2011](#)), and may avoid
14 standing up to destructive leaders with the belief that their behaviours would be seen as
15 intolerance and against the accepted organizational norms, especially in power distant and
16 collectivist societies ([Hattab et al., 2022](#)).

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

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45 Unlike conservation of resources theory or the job demands-resources model frequently
46 adopted by researchers for explicating employee outcomes, social identity theory reflects upon
47 the social dynamics of organizational life as the guiding principles for individuals' behaviours.
48 The social identity theory underscores individuals' innate tendency to associate themselves to
49 various social categories based upon certain affiliations such as cultural, religious,
50 organizational, or group membership, etc. ([Tajfel & Turner, 1986](#)). This cognitive
51 categorization enables them to define and reflect upon their self-concept ([Ashforth & Mael,](#)
52 [1989](#)). The theory is premised on three principles: Individuals strive to maintain a positive
53 social identity, a positive social identity relies on favourable comparisons between in-groups
54 and relevant outgroups, and when individuals consider their social identity to be unsatisfactory,
55 they are inclined to leave their group and join some other group considered positively distinct.
56 While partly diverging from [Tajfel and Turner \(1986\)](#), the authors believe that apprehensions
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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 & 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 & 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.

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3 *H2. Destructive leadership positively influences continuance commitment.*
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5 *Continuance commitment and psychological withdrawal*

6 While each commitment component signifies a psychological state with implications for
7 whether or not to continue membership of the organization, the nature of each of these states
8 differs ([Wasti, 2005](#)). In particular, the probability of desirable job outcomes is higher with
9 high affective or normative commitment, whereas such a probability is low with continuance
10 commitment. Employees with a continuance commitment dominant profile are therefore more
11 likely to undergo psychological withdrawal because they are not emotionally attached to the
12 organization, yet cannot leave for the costs entailing departure ([Islam et al., 2023](#); [Somers,
13 2009](#)). [Jain et al. \(2009\)](#) argue that continuance commitment belongs to the cognitive domain
14 of individuals' personality, and is negatively linked with employee wellbeing, in contrast to
15 affective and normative commitment, reminiscent of a positive affective mental state. Taking
16 a pragmatic view, the authors postulate that the predictive efficacy of continuance commitment
17 is stronger in relation to employees' psychological withdrawal due to deficient comparisons
18 compounded by a defensive frame of mind.

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24 *H3. Continuance commitment positively influences psychological withdrawal.*
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26 *The mediating role of continuance commitment*

27 Management style determines the level of employee commitment, while exploitation by leaders
28 stimulates negative employee behaviours ([Aşçı, 2020](#)). Employees facing destructive leaders,
29 usually adopt the safest recourse available ([Nauman et al., 2020](#)) and opt for avoidance
30 strategies as against confrontational one's ([Wu et al., 2018](#)). This phenomenon can be
31 attributed to two main factors. First, employees adopt a defensive demeanour to conserve their
32 social and self-image while navigating through the aversive situation ([Ashforth & Lee, 1990](#)).
33 Second, it reflects a desire to avoid shame and loss of face, which is of particular significance
34 in Pakistan's power-distant and collectivist society, where hierarchies and compliance are
35 emphasized ([Hofstede et al., 2010](#); [Narayanan & Moon, 2022](#)). Factors such as individuals'
36 employability and job market conditions may further compel a disgruntled employee to stay
37 put and deal with the destructive leader, rather than exiting the organization ([Pandey et al.,
38 2021](#)). In coherence with the social identity theory, the authors speculate that upon perceiving
39 discrimination in contrast to outgroups or being exploited by their leaders, employees undergo
40 a consistent evaluation of their employment relationship, submit to passive compliance, and
41 search for salvation through withdrawal as an implicit mode of defence.

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47 *H4. Continuance commitment mediates the positive relationship between
48 destructive leadership and psychological withdrawal.*
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51 *The moderating role of perceptions of organizational politics*

52 Politics is inevitable in organizations owing to the ambiguity arising from intense competition
53 and rapid technological changes ([Lawong et al., 2018](#)). However, employee reactions to
54 politics vary, influenced by distinct economic and organizational conditions that shape their
55 perceptions and subsequent behaviours ([Hsiung et al., 2011](#)). It is therefore important to
56 acknowledge the influence of internal and external factors on individuals' manner of coping
57 ([Pandey et al., 2021](#)). In this backdrop, destructive behaviours by leaders contribute to an
58 intensification of the political climate in organizations ([Ferris et al., 2019](#)). Within such an
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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 & Ferris, 1991) places a cognitive burden on employees, pushing them into a defensive frame of mind (Ashforth & Lee, 1990), which ultimately manifests in destructive attitudinal and behavioural responses (Bedi & 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 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

“PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE”

Source(s): Created by authors

Equations for the model

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

$$PW = \beta_0 + \beta_1(DL) + \beta_2(CC) + \beta_3(OP) + \beta_4(DL \times OP) + \beta_5(CC \times OP) + \varepsilon$$

$$CC = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1(DL) + \alpha_2(OP) + \alpha_3(DL \times OP) + \varepsilon$$

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 i.e., i) Habib Bank Ltd., ii) Muslim Commercial Bank, iii) National Bank of Pakistan, iv) United Bank Ltd., v) Allied Bank Ltd., and vi) 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 ($p^2 = .13$), with two predictors, a significance level of .05, and a target power of .95. The power analysis yielded a minimum recommended sample size of 111 participants, with the critical R^2 value being .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 & 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, & 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 I*.

Table I. Descriptive and correlation coefficients

“PLEASE INSERT TABLE I HERE”

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): Created by authors

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 indicators 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 3*. The internal consistency reliability concurrently verified through Cronbach's alpha and the composite reliability measure yielded above par values, with α and CR values $> .7$. Likewise, the Average Variance Extracted measure indicated sufficient evidence for convergent validity, with AVE values for all constructs being $> .5$ ([Hair et al., 2019](#)). The HTMT ratios further accorded evidence as to the measures being discriminant with ratios below the threshold of $.85$ ([Henseler et al., 2015](#)).

Table II. Reliability and validity statistics

“PLEASE INSERT TABLE II HERE”

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): Created by authors

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 $.453$ was significant considering the critical R^2 value of $.053$ extracted through power analysis.

The analysis reflected that destructive leadership positively influences employees' psychological withdrawal behaviours at 95% CI (β $.249$, $STDEV$ $.123$, t 2.015 , $LLCI$ $.036$,

ULCI .445), in line with *H1* (DL → PW). The results further provided that destructive leadership positively influences continuance commitment (DL → CC) - (β .254, *STDEV* .092, t 2.766, *LLCI* .112, *ULCI* .417), and continuance commitment positively influences psychological withdrawal behaviours among employees (CC → PW) - (β .293, *STDEV* .102, t 2.876, *LLCI* .092, *ULCI* .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 .074, *STDEV* .034, t 2.174, *LLCI* .019, *ULCI* .129). The total effect was also statistically significant (β .323, *STDEV* .120, t 2.689, *LLCI* .112, *ULCI* .511), which hints towards a complementary partial mediation.

The total effect moderation as per *H5* - OP x (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 .052, *STDEV* .028, t 1.863, *LLCI* .008, *ULCI* .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 III*.

Table III: Hypotheses' Results

“PLEASE INSERT TABLE III HERE”

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

Source(s): Created by authors

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: Figure 2 (a), (b), and (c)*). 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.

Figure 2 (a). Simple slope analysis - OP x DL → CC

“PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 2 (a) HERE”

Figure 2 (b). Simple slope analysis - OP x CC → PW

“PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 2 (b) HERE”

Figure 2 (c). Simple slope analysis - OP x DL → PW

“PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 2 (c) HERE”

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

Source(s): Created by authors

The slopes at ± 1 SD as per *Figure 2 (a)* illustrated an exponentially positive effect of the interaction term (OP x DL) on continuance commitment - OP x DL → CC. This indicates

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3 that the influence of destructive leadership on continuance commitment was stronger for
4 employees with higher perceptions of politics ($\beta .179$, $STDEV .072$, $t 2.475$, $LLCI .054$, $ULCI$
5 $.289$). Likewise, *Figure 2 (b)* reflected an incremental effect of the interaction term (OP x CC)
6 on psychological withdrawal – OP x CC \rightarrow PW i.e., continually committed employees with
7 higher perceptions of politics were more likely to disengage compared to those with lower
8 perceptions ($\beta .086$, $STDEV .051$, $t 1.656$, $LLCI .010$, $ULCI .277$).

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11 In *Figure 2 (c)*, the slopes revealed a positive impact of the interaction term (OP x DL)
12 on psychological withdrawal – employees' proclivity to disengage increased incrementally
13 with higher perceptions of politics when faced with destructive leadership ($\beta .135$, $STDEV$
14 $.045$, $t 2.978$, $LLCI .083$, $ULCI .277$). The positive total effect moderation path coefficient
15 presented in *Table III* - ($\beta .052$, $STDEV .028$, $t 1.863$, $LLCI .008$, $ULCI .098$) aligned with the
16 slope analyses, confirming the catalytic role of perceptual politics as a significant work
17 environment impediment.
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20 21 Discussion

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

27
28 The premise of the study is that destructive behaviours by leaders coupled with cultural
29 constraints trigger defensive attitudes in employees. This defensiveness compels employees to
30 stay put and submit to unsatisfactory or deficient social identity, pushing them into withdrawal
31 ([Ashforth & Lee, 1990](#)). Concurrently, perceptions of organizational politics amplify the
32 employees' propensity to disengage, for they can neither identify with nor exit the organization
33 in cognizance of the associated costs.
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37 Considering the theoretical principles established by [Tajfel and Turner \(1986\)](#), the
38 study implies that employees undergo a consistent evaluation of their employment relationship
39 upon being exploited or discriminated by their leaders in contrast to outgroups. Despite the loss
40 of perceived salience of their social identity and sense of belonging with their organization
41 owing to deficient comparisons, employees do not leave their group or organization for that
42 matter, rather they submit to defensiveness and tend to search for salvation through withdrawal.
43 This is consistent with the proposition that superiors' exploitative behaviours inflict
44 psychological distress, serving as a catalyst for employees' engagement in deviant behaviours
45 contingent on the extent of their identification with organizations ([De Clercq et al., 2021](#)).

46
47 The literary review and the ensuing data analyses substantiate the idea that perceptions
48 of politics serve as a perceptual impediment, which exacerbates the cognitive burdens on
49 employees ([Meisler et al., 2019](#)). The framework is somewhat complementary to [Shamsudin](#)
50 [et al. \(2023\)](#), who noted that leader favouritism can instigate withdrawal behaviours among
51 employees, with the adverse influence being stronger for those who believe that it would be
52 difficult for them to find an alternate employment. The study also corresponds in principle to
53 [Livne-Ofer et al. \(2019\)](#), who maintained that employee exploitation typically fosters a
54 negative environment stimulating withdrawal behaviours.
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Theoretical contributions

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

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

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

27 28 29 30 *Practical implications*

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

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

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

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52 By recognizing the complex interplay of attitudes and behaviours, and the cultural
53 context in which they occur, organizations can promote a harmonious and resilient work
54 environment, instrumental in mitigating withdrawal behaviours, concurrently improving
55 employee and organizational outcomes ([Al Jisr et al., 2020](#)). On an interpersonal level, leaders
56 need to consider provisioning of performance feedback to enhance employee experiences and
57 deter withdrawal behaviours. Organizational managers ought to actively highlight favourable
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3 aspects during one-on-one feedback, recognize efforts and completed work to foster a positive
4 atmosphere ([Jiang & Qu, 2022](#)).
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6 *Limitations*

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

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29 The primary objective of the current study was to present a systematically integrated model for
30 an enhanced understanding of the relationship between destructive leadership and employees'
31 disengagement. The proposed research model can be validated for diverse cultural contexts.
32 The model's applicability can further be extended to validate other covert employee behaviours
33 as outcomes while utilizing other potential mediating variables. Moreover, researchers can
34 utilize a different theoretical perspective to elucidate employees' engagement in withdrawal
35 behaviours. The overarching influence of individuals' personality traits on their tendency to
36 submit to defensiveness and consequent responses could also be explored under the five-factor
37 model of personality. More importantly, a comparative analysis of the phenomena can be
38 conducted across public and private sector financial institutions, considering the influence of
39 organizational culture. Complementing quantitative findings with qualitative methodologies,
40 such as interviews or focused group discussions, can provide nuanced insights into employees'
41 perceptions and experiences. In conclusion, future research in this domain has the potential to
42 further enrich researchers' comprehension of the interplay between stressors and employee
43 behaviours.
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Figure 3. The final fitted model
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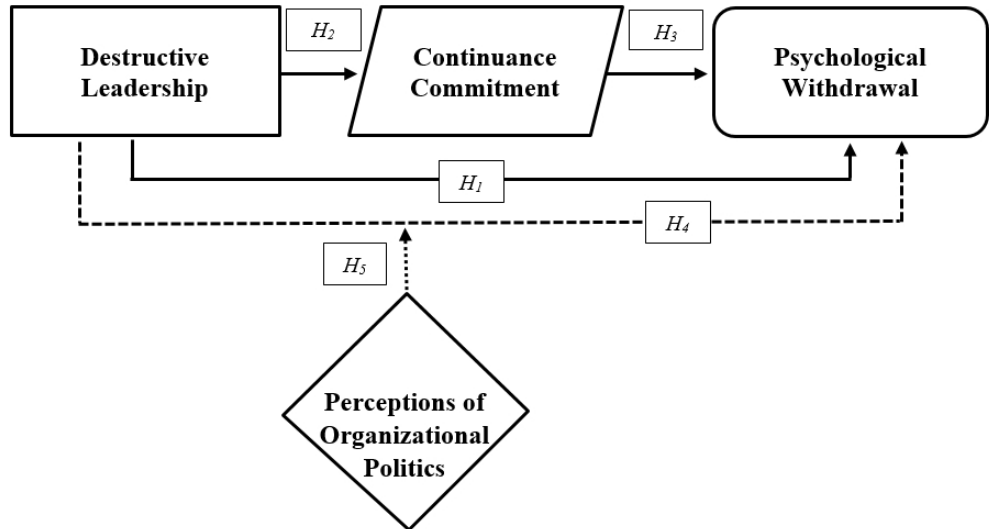


Figure 1. Conceptual framework
405x221mm (57 x 57 DPI)

Table I. Descriptive and correlation coefficients

Concept	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SK</i>	<i>KT</i>	GEN	AG	TEN	PW	DL	CC	OP
GEN	1.20	.40	1.50	.27	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
AG	3.47	1.29	.91	.61	-.06	-	-	-	-	-	-
TEN	3.51	1.20	.47	.33	-.10	.93**	-	-	-	-	-
PW	2.67	.91	.54	-.85	-.02	-.09	-.18*	-	-	-	-
DL	2.61	.98	.77	-.68	-.04	-.24**	-.31**	.52**	-	-	-
CC	3.59	.78	.06	-.92	-.20*	-.23**	-.22**	.45**	.39**	-	-
OP	3.46	.90	-.66	.20	-.17*	.03	-.08	.44**	.54**	.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): Created by authors

Table II. Reliability and validity statistics

Concept	<i>a</i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>AVE</i>	CC	DL	OP	PW
CC	.873	.880	.530	-	-	-	-
DL	.966	.970	.612	.451	-	-	-
OP	.958	.965	.683	.381	.569	-	-
PW	.927	.940	.666	.507	.554	.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): Created by authors

Table III: Hypotheses' Results

	<i>Path</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>STDEV</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>5.0%</i>	<i>95.0%</i>
<i>H₁</i>	DL → PW	.249	.123	2.015	.036	.445
<i>H₂</i>	DL → CC	.254	.092	2.766	.112	.417
<i>H₃</i>	CC → PW	.293	.102	2.876	.092	.432
<i>H₄</i>	DL → CC → PW	.074	.034	2.174	.019	.129
<i>H₅</i>	OP x (DL → CC → PW)	.052	.028	1.863	.008	.098

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

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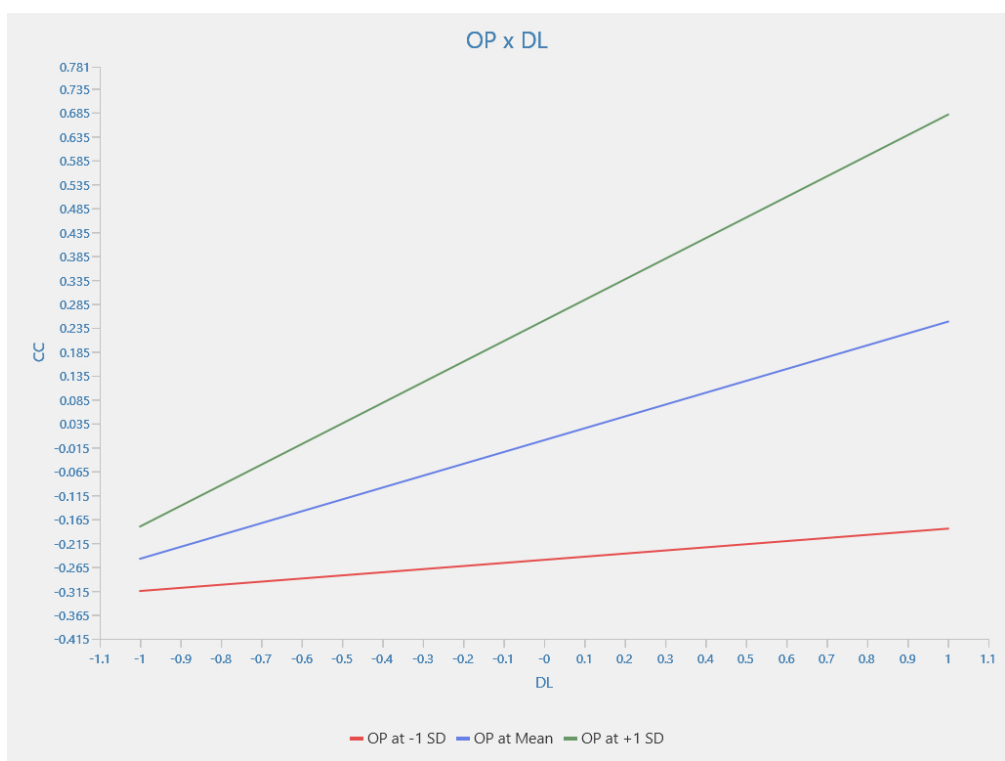
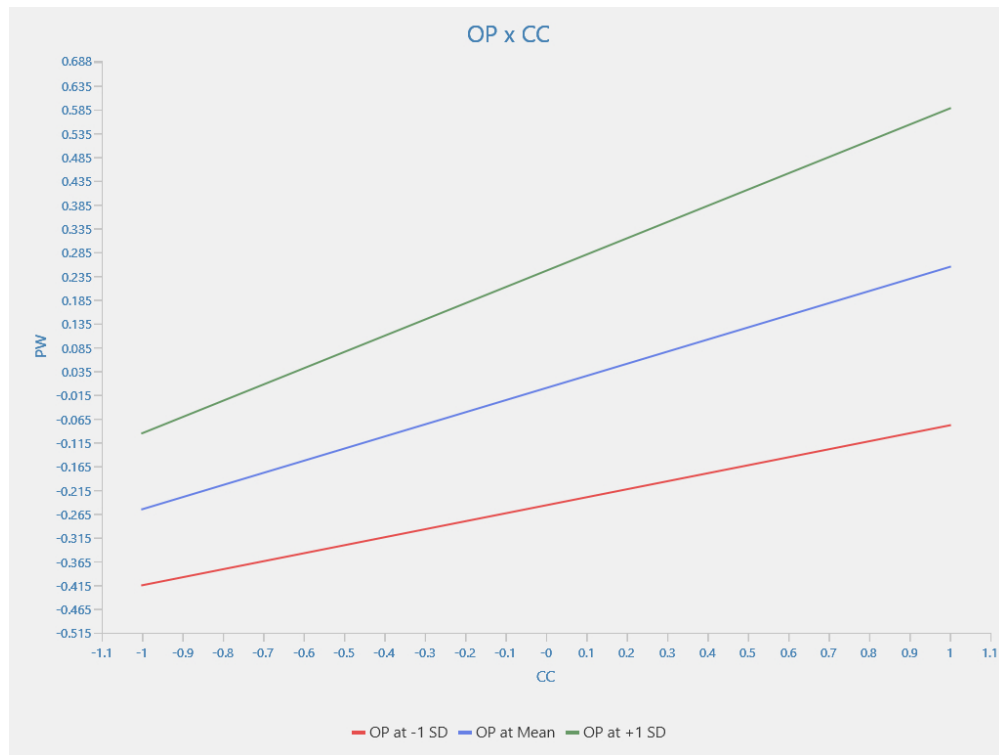


Figure 2 (a). Simple slope analysis - OP x (DL → CC)
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31 Figure 2 (b). Simple slope analysis - OP x (CC → PW)

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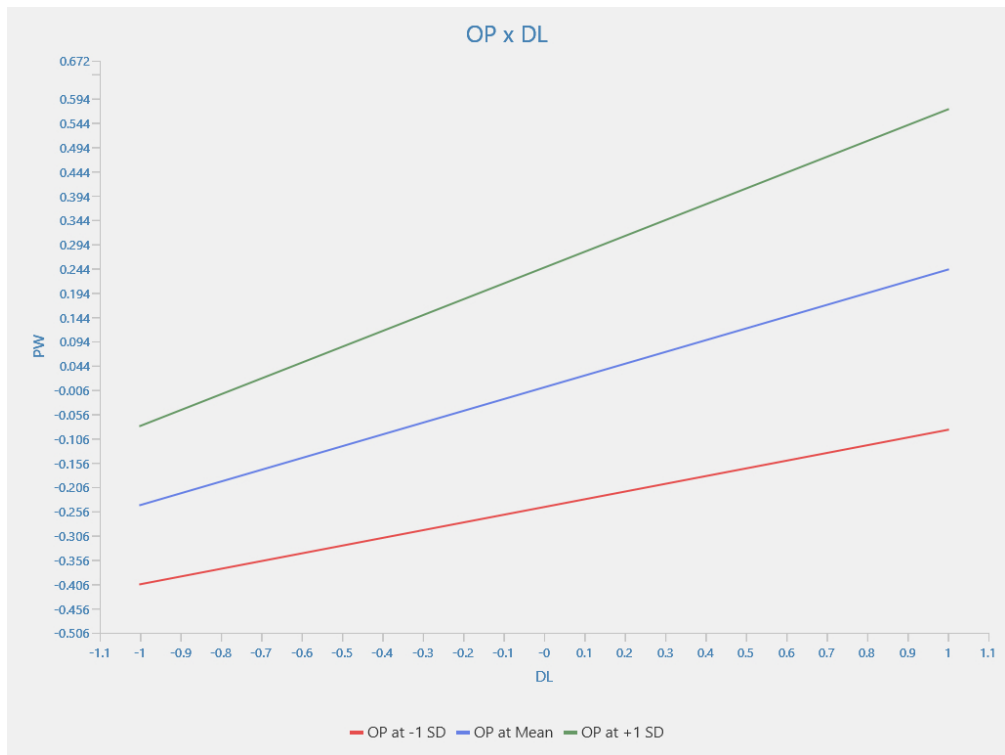


Figure 2 (c). Simple slope analysis - OP x (DL → PW)

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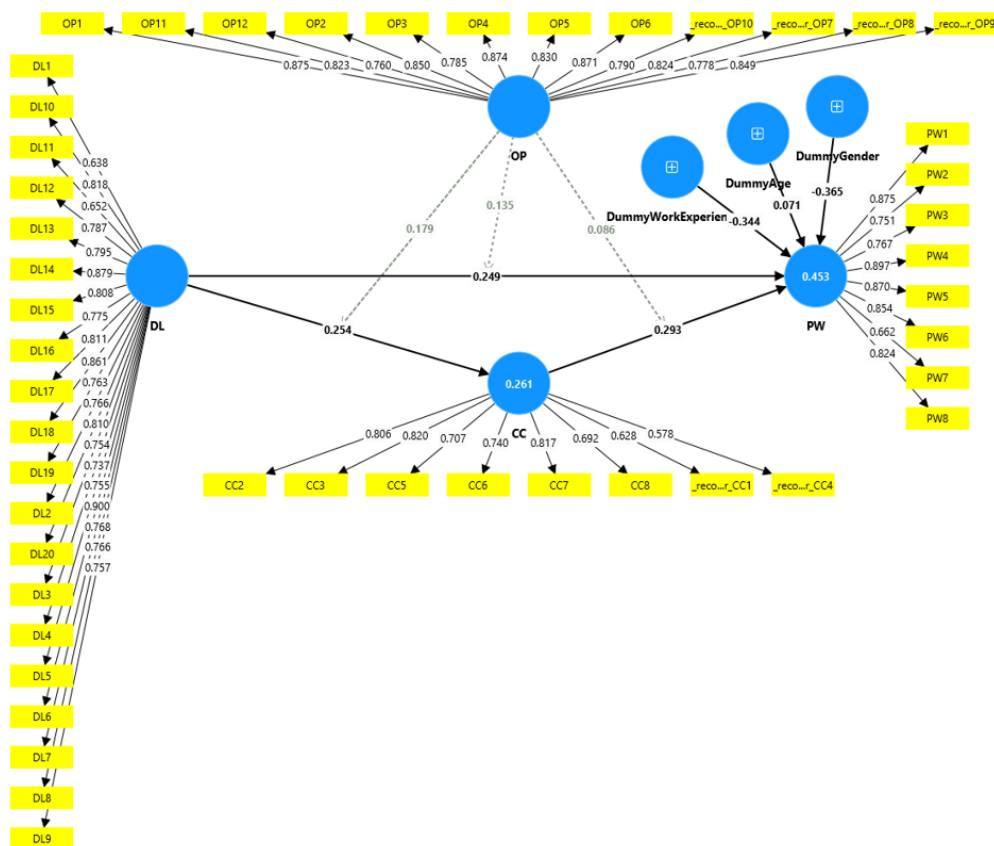


Figure 3. The final fitted model

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'Reviewer Feedback and Response'

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

The authors would like to express gratitude to the reviewers for their valuable comments. The reviewers' observations have been deliberated over, and a sincere attempt has been made to incorporate the requisite changes. As part of the effort, the research paper has been significantly updated, specifically the 'introduction' and 'results' sections in accordance with the reviewers' kind suggestions. The authors' response alongside the updated research paper is submitted for consideration, please.

Compliance Details (Reviewer 1)

S #	Reviewer's Suggestions & Observations	Author's Actions / Response	Compliance Ref: / Page #
1	Please discuss the variables taken for study in Introduction chapter then support by existing literature.	The authors have made a sincere effort to solidify the introductory chapter by incorporating additional literature. The definitions of variables are marked in 'green', whereas literature on 'destructive leadership', covering its components, impact, and existing findings, is highlighted in 'yellow', considering the valuable suggestions by all the reviewers.	Introduction section
2	No use of pronouns as I or we it should be authors propose. for example, (page 6 line 41). Convert all pronouns in common noun.	The reviewer's kind observation is acknowledged, and the research paper has been proof read in entirety once more, while replacing all personal pronouns ('we' and 'our') with common nouns ('the authors' and 'the study').	-
3	Instead of population it should have been the sample (page 9 line 39).	While complying to the reviewer's kind suggestion, the identified sub-heading has been revised from 'population' to 'sample'.	-

'Reviewer Feedback and Response'

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

The authors would like to express gratitude to the reviewers for their valuable comments. The reviewers' observations have been deliberated over, and a sincere attempt has been made to incorporate the requisite changes. As part of the effort, the research paper has been significantly updated, specifically the 'introduction' and 'results' sections in accordance with the reviewers' kind suggestions. The authors' response alongside the updated research paper is submitted for consideration, please.

Compliance Details (Reviewer 2)

S #	Reviewer's Suggestions & Observations	Author's Actions / Response	Compliance Ref: / Page #
1	Destructive leadership is the core construct of this study. The current version of the paper does not provide sufficient literature review except one sentence on page 2 that defines it. A revision should enhance significantly this part. What is it? What are the components? What is the impact? Are there any empirical findings, in particular in the high-power distance culture?	<p>The observation rightfully highlighted by the reviewer is acknowledged, and the authors may kindly be absolved for the identified shortcoming.</p> <p>The authors have made a sincere effort to solidify the introductory chapter by incorporating additional literature on destructive leadership. The incorporations covering destructive leadership's components, impact, and existing findings are highlighted in 'yellow' in the revised manuscript.</p>	Introduction section
2	The cognitive mechanism articulated in this paper is counterintuitive. The authors conflated two concepts, hence the soundness of hypothesis 2. Destructive leadership behavior acts as a stressor that depletes employee psychological and cognitive resources. It is a cost in terms of resource. But this cost is different than the perceived cost of leaving an organization. The two types of cost are different concepts. The resource cost	<p>The reviewer's kind remarks are acknowledged with the submission that destructive leadership has been conceptualized as a stressor that imposes a burden on employees' psychological and cognitive resources, potentially leading to defensive cognitive outcomes such as continuance commitment. Hypothesis 2, therefore, posits that destructive leadership (as a stressor), positively influences continuance commitment, evocative of employees' defensive cognitive evaluations.</p> <p>The authors further submit that though the reviewer's argument may be valid in itself,</p>	Hypothesis # 2

	<p>that resulted from destructive leadership can not lead to the hypothesis 2.</p>	<p>the study does not argue that the resource cost resulting from destructive leadership leads to continuance commitment. Instead, it theorizes that destructive leadership's stressor effect influences continuance commitment. This distinction is critical as the authors focus on the stressor mechanism of destructive leadership rather than equating it to cost in terms of resource.</p> <p>Considering the reviewer's kind observation however, the identified statement has been revised alongside additional discussion to avoid any impression pertaining to potential conflation of concepts.</p>	
3	<p>Similarly issue occurs to hypothesis 3. It is stated in the paper that "Employees with a continuance commitment dominant profile are therefore more likely to undergo psychological withdrawal because they are not emotionally attached to their organization." This statement implies a negative correlation between continuous commitment and affective commitment, which is not supported in the literature. As cited in the paper, the Somers (2008) study found positive correlation between the two. Further, Somers' study found that Absenteeism and Lateness were lower among continuous commitment (CC) group than those of Affective-Normative commitment (AC-NC) group. Hypothesis 3 is not consistent with the literature.</p>	<p>The reviewer's kind observation is acknowledged with the submission that as cited in the paper, extant literature supports the notion that each commitment component signifies a different psychological state with implications for whether or not to continue membership of the organization. The probability of desirable job outcomes is purported to be higher with high affective or normative commitment, whereas such a probability is low with continuance commitment (Wasti, 2005). Accordingly, based on these assertions, hypothesis 3 was postulated i.e., continuance commitment positively influences psychological withdrawal.</p> <p>Specifically, regarding the statement pointed out by the esteemed reviewer, the authors submit that Somers (2009) hypothesized a positive association between continuance commitment (CC) and work withdrawal, while a negative association between affective & normative commitment (AC-NC) and work withdrawal. Somers (2009) further implied a negative association between AC and CC by stating that "A CC dominant profile</p>	<p>Hypothesis # 3</p>

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How do you reconcile the discrepancy?

should be associated with high indices of work withdrawal behaviour as employees are not emotionally committed to the organization, but cannot leave without incurring high costs” (p. 77).

The authors acknowledge that [Somers \(2009\)](#) did report a positive correlation, but suggested the results to be contrary to expectations and without unequivocal support. [Somers \(2009\)](#) also noted that the “*findings are anomalous in that they are not consistent with commitment theory and are contrary to Wasti’s (2005) results, in which lower levels of work withdrawal were observed for employees with AC-NC dominant profile*” (p. 80), while noting limitations that could have led to results contrary to the literature.

The authors now place reliance on [Jain et al. \(2009\)](#), who argued 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.

It is pertinent to highlight that [Jain et al. \(2009\)](#) reported a negative correlation between affective commitment (sense of attachment & organizational attraction) and continuance commitment. The said study, advocating a negative relationship between continuance commitment and employee well-being, has now been cited in the revised manuscript so as to ensure adequate theoretical support for hypothesis 3.

Considering the reviewer’s kind observation and recognizing the frailty of literature & competing arguments regarding the association among commitment components, the authors have made a dedicated effort to ensure that the

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		hypothesis is appropriately grounded in and consistent with theory.	
4	<p>One may argue that leaders are more likely to demonstrate destructive leadership behavior when they see employees have no other options. Therefore, continuous commitment causes destructive leadership behavior. The analysis needs to include alternative models to rule out alternative explanations.</p> <p>The study found significant moderated mediation effect. Figures 2a, 2b and 2c illustrate different slopes. Are the differences statistically significant? Which specific paths are moderated by politics? The revision should provide the details.</p>	<p>With regard to the reviewer's apprehensions concerning alternative models and slope analysis, the authors have attempted to account for the shortcomings in the revised manuscript.</p> <p>More specifically, additional commentary on slope analysis has now been incorporated, and is highlighted in 'yellow'. The discussion highlights the statistical significance of the slopes on the three direct paths i.e., OP x DL → CC, OP x CC → PW, and OP x DL → PW, leading up to the statistically significant total effect moderation i.e., OP x DL → CC → PW.</p> <p>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: Figure 2 (a), (b), and (c)). 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 positive total effect moderation path coefficient presented in Table III aligns with the slope analyses, confirming the catalytic role of perceptual politics. The testing of a total effect moderation model also serves as an empirical novelty, which has just recently become possible with the advent of smartPLS 4.</p> <p>As regards the potential applicability of alternative models, the authors submit that dedicated efforts were put in place to ensure that the hypothesized patterns of relationship are consistent with authentic literature. Considering the reviewer's apprehensions however, the prospects of</p>	<p>Slope analysis section</p> <p>&</p> <p>Limitations section</p>

reverse causality have been acknowledged in the limitations section. While it may be argued that leaders are more likely to demonstrate destructive behaviours to employees who are vulnerable, and have no other option, hinting towards the potential influence of continuance commitment on destructive leadership, the authors, considering the scope of the study, and the way the hypotheses are situated in literature, could not find unequivocal theoretical or empirical support for the argument. The fact that the argument can serve as a reasonable avenue for further exploration by future researchers has now been acknowledged in the revised manuscript, with the request for a compassionate consideration.

References

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‘Reviewer Feedback and Response’

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

The authors would like to express gratitude to the reviewers for their valuable comments. The reviewers’ observations have been deliberated over, and a sincere attempt has been made to incorporate the requisite changes. As part of the effort, the research paper has been significantly updated, specifically the ‘introduction’ and ‘results’ sections in accordance with the reviewers’ kind suggestions. The authors’ response alongside the updated research paper is submitted for consideration, please.

Compliance Details (Reviewer 3)

S #	Reviewer’s Suggestions & Observations	Author’s Actions / Response	Compliance Ref: / Page #
1	The claim that the study fills "a void by highlighting employees’ cognitive evaluations as catalysts for negative behaviours" risks being somewhat overstated. For example, in the closely related field of intention to quit research, there has been investigation of perception/cognitive appraisal.	<p>Considering the reviewer’s kind suggestion, the research paper has been proof read in entirety once more, and necessary revisions have been incorporated to ensure accuracy and avoid any potential overstatements.</p> <p>The identified statement has also been rephrased for casting a more rational impression, and has been marked in ‘blue’ in the theoretical contributions section.</p> <p>Moreover, the authors have made a sincere effort to solidify the introductory chapter. The incorporations are highlighted in the revised manuscript: definitions of variables are marked in ‘green’, whereas literature on ‘destructive leadership’, covering its components, impact, and existing findings, along with additional commentary on slope analyses, is highlighted in ‘yellow’, in consideration of other reviewers’ suggestions.</p>	-