

- Title:** **Investigating the Impact of Despotic Leadership on Healthcare Workers' Psychological Well-Being in Pakistan: Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion and Interaction Avoidance**
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- DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.29145/jmr.131.04>
- History:** Received: September 20, 2025, Revised: March 03, 2026, Accepted: May 14, 2026, Published: June 30, 2026
- Citation:** Tariq, J., Zahur, H., Iqbal, M. A., & Janjua, M. I. (2026). Investigating the impact of despotic leadership on healthcare workers' psychological well-being in Pakistan: Mediating role of emotional exhaustion and interaction avoidance. *Journal of Management and Research*, 13(1), 75–100.
<https://doi.org/10.29145/jmr.131.04>
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- Conflict of Interest:** Author(s) declared no conflict of interest



Investigating the Impact of Despotic Leadership on Healthcare Workers' Psychological Well-Being in Pakistan: Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion and Interaction Avoidance

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Abstract

This research explores the complex mechanisms through which despotic leadership affects the mental health of paramedical staff in Pakistan's healthcare sector, drawing on the Social Exchange Theory. In an attempt to find the truth behind the effect of despotic leadership on employees, the paramedical staff from the health sector was chosen from public hospitals of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. A total of 154 respondents filled the self-administered questionnaire. Simple linear regression was applied to check Hypothesis 1 (which was accepted). Mediation and moderation analyses, including the estimation of total, direct, and indirect effects, were conducted using PROCESS Models 4 and 1, respectively. The results of both mediation and moderation analysis showed partial mediation and moderation. Exploring the managerial context, an investigation is needed to understand the mechanism of despotic leadership through training such leaders and instilling an essence of ethical leadership. The results of this study may shed light on how to improve the mental well-being of paramedical staff and reduce the negative outcomes of despotic leadership through training, mentoring, and counseling. Both the HR and HRD managers can hire employees properly and can also train them in future to create a better working environment. Shedding light upon the social exchange theory, this research uses the mediating role of emotional exhaustion to check the effect of despotic leadership on employees' psychological well-being and interaction avoidance as a coping and buffering mechanism to check the effect of despotic leadership on emotional exhaustion.

Keywords: despotic leadership, emotional exhaustion, healthcare

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workers, interaction avoidance, psychological well-being, Pakistan

Introduction

Individuals with leadership skills inspire their cohorts to achieve organizational objectives. According to Erkutlu and Chafra (2018), leadership is centered on the traits, dispositions, and situations that uphold an individual's worth in addition to the organization's worth, as well as the group's collective execution of various tasks including planning, determining, and assisting.

Leadership has always been seen to be a good and positive phenomenon towards its followers and the organizations that do not venture into the dark or shady side (Glaso et al., 2010). The dysfunctional aspect of leadership is underdeveloped and needs attention to literature to find out that what despotic leaders do with their subordinates (Naseer et al., 2016). The lack of growth in the literature pertaining to the dark side of leadership triggers researchers to explore this area, for instance, abusive supervision (Fischer et al., 2021), tyrannical leadership (Balwant, 2019), destructive leadership (Camgoz, 2021), and despotic leadership (Jabeen & Rahim, 2021).

Several studies have tested the effects of despotic leadership on employee productivity, however, experiencing these activities by despotic leaders may create feelings of hatred about themselves and their jobs among employees (Jabeen & Rahim, 2021). Furthermore, despotic leadership or dark leadership can have inverse effects on the organization and its customers as a whole, in addition to the individual himself (Raza et al., 2024). Many studies have also reported the evidence of organizational deviance due to the negative consequences of this phenomenon (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018). It has also been reported to hinder the skills of an employee, such as their creativity and career advancement (Rasool et al., 2018). Overall, such factors have led to the problems of psychological well-being among employees, ultimately impacting their job performance negatively (Raja et al., 2019). The current study focuses on the relationship of despotic leadership (DL) with employee psychological well-being (PWB). Employees working in the healthcare sector feel the urge to be treated with respect, to have autonomy at work, and to enjoy healthy working relations with their seniors. Every employee needs appreciation and requires a conducive environment for learning, where interaction with the boss or superior remains easy going and understandable. This would eventually

lead to higher performance in the organization. If, on the other hand, the boss or leader manipulates or is tyrant, this would create a sense of humiliation and stress on the part of the employees who, in turn, will underperform.

When an employee remains disturbed at the workplace, this affects his communication, decision-making, confidence, and other creative skills at the workplace, including organizational citizenship behavior and performance. This, in turn, can seriously impact the mental health of the employees. Despotic leaders do not value the importance of their employee's energy reserves or that the employees may lose their energy due to mental stress or trauma. It has been observed that in order to fulfil their desire, despotic leaders manipulate the paramedical staff to the extent that they work for longer hours, are not appreciated, and remain under paid which, in turn, leads to severe mental health issues affecting their performance (Hou et al. [2019](#)). In doing so, the despotic leader may not even give any prior warning or alert to the employees but expect them to do whatsoever he orders by showing rude behavior. No employee is allowed to even question his order, which creates a stream of hateful emotions for them. Employees have been known to show negative behaviors in such circumstances, such as an unethical style of management which has been associated with the perils of bad psychological well-being. Research in the field of despotic leadership also has revealed that due to the continuous abusive, manipulative and humiliating style of the leader, the employee itself has started adopting such behaviors. This is off course again a testimony of the disturbed psychological well-being and hateful emotions displaying selfish behavior and ignoring their team members (Stern & Westphal, [2010](#)). Based upon the above, this study aims to make organizations realize about such situations dampen this style of leadership in their organizations. This attitude can lead to low creativity, agility, teamwork among employees, and also reduces organizational profits and employee turnover (Detert et al., [2007](#)). The employees, being the main resource leaving the organization will be because of the emotional exhaustion developed due to the despotic leader's behavior that creates a restless mind and in return creates stress (Harvey et al., [2007](#)).

The second variable under discussion relates to emotional exhaustion which comes under the category of burnout, stress, and tensions that employees face at the workplace (D'Souza et al., [2021](#)). Particularly,

despotic leadership emerges as the major source of stress due to the interaction between leader and employees at the workplace causing a disturbed working environment (Nauman et al., [2020](#)). Emotional exhaustion is taken as a mediator in this study. It has been established from previous studies that despotic leadership can lead to emotional exhaustion which can affect the psychological well-being of the individuals.

Moreover, psychological well-being relates to many attributes that include how employees enjoy autonomy at their workplace, have a sense of purpose, say, or the liberty to express themselves, their talents and skills, build relations with colleagues for the benefit of the organization, how much they know their strengths and weaknesses at workplace, and are happy to handle their relationships with others or not (Ryff, [2013](#)). Based on the above argument, if employees are faced with despotic leadership behavior, they tend to face emotional exhaustion and ultimately an adverse effect on their psychological well-being. This study also uses interaction avoidance as a moderator based on the fact that it is an individual's voluntary action to relieve themselves from facing despotic leader which can help to reduce stress and buffer emotional exhaustion, thus has a positive effect on their psychological well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, [1991](#)). Thus, the research has both positive and negative effects on the psychological well-being of the employees if the interaction avoidance variable is used to buffer the effect.

The current study focuses on the health sector of Pakistan, which is usually not paid much scholarly attention. Suffering and sometimes silenced by the despotic leadership, employees in the health sector face extreme emotional exhaustion (Samad et al., [2021](#)).

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the impact of despotic leadership on employees' psychological well-being within Pakistan's healthcare sector. Furthermore, the study seeks to analyze the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between despotic leadership and psychological well-being, as well as the moderating role of interaction avoidance in this relationship.

Research Gap/Contribution

The moderator adopted in the study Interaction Avoidance that is a personality trait justifies the research gap of this study since it has been

adopted as a buffering mechanism to moderate the impact of the despotic leadership on the emotional exhaustion and employee well-being. This is being put to test in order to test the underlying mechanism of checking the effects of despotic leadership on the psychological well-being and emotional exhaustion. Investigating the social exchange theory, the current study focuses on the proposition that if a negative behavior is shown by a leader, the employees also tend to imitate the same behavior and reciprocate it. The study has been conducted in the health care sector of Pakistan and the respondents are nurses which was a tough and difficult task because of the cultural settings of Pakistan. The people are having high scores in high uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and power distance which make it an interesting gap. This can contribute to the body of knowledge in future.

Significance

To understand the phenomenon, one needs to first determine who is a despotic leader. Despotic leaders are incapable of inspiring teams, promoting the actions of their subordinates, or creating enduring core values for the company (Thoroughgood et al., [2018](#)). They also lack vision. The behaviors exhibited by despotic executives include screaming, berating, intimidating, and threatening staff members in public. In addition, these leaders use forceful eye contact, hide important information, and mock their subordinates (Tepper et al., [2011](#)). The presence of despotic leadership in Pakistan's healthcare industry presents notable obstacles that adversely impact the mental health of healthcare practitioners. Despotic leadership methods cause a variety of issues for paramedical workers, including nurses, technicians, and support staff. These issues eventually affect the mental health and general job satisfaction of the paramedical crew. Observing the recent organizational trends, it is imperative to work on the dark side of leadership to stimulate organizations to focus on the reasons, along with providing practical solutions to combat the problem.

Theoretical Framework

The current study is based on the Social Exchange Theory by Blau ([2017](#)). The study sheds light on the importance of the negative side of leadership which is also called as despotic leadership and therefore it gives a relationship with the psychological well-being of employees and emotional exhaustion as a mediating mechanism. However, the interaction avoidance has been used as a buffering mechanism in the study to check the

underlying reasons that how despotic leadership affects the well-being of employees through this mechanism.

The behavior of employees in any social setting is due to an exchange that can be with anyone and this this can result in either increasing or decreasing the benefits in the organization. Due to the despotic leader, this balance is disturbed and therefore, the employees exchange increases the costs of the organization in terms of stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion and at the end affecting their self-esteem and psychological well-being. Looking at the Social Exchange theory, the employees when faced with a despotic leader in the healthcare sector, feel emotionally exhausted and have a negative impact on their psychological well-being. Therefore, this is a two way or reciprocated process as in the theory. However, the utilization of interaction avoidance as a moderator acts as a buffering mechanism which can help in reducing the emotional exhaustion which can in return can enhance the psychological well-being of employees. Hence in the light of this argument, the interaction avoidance can act as a two-way interaction between the despotic leader after avoiding him contributing to the two way exchange and then reducing the psychological well-being and emotional exhaustion which is a strong theoretical linkage to the social exchange theory.

Literature Review

Despotic Leadership and Psychological Well- Being

The social exchange theory posits that there must be some transaction between the two parties who have an interaction. During this exchange, there is an expectation for a behavioral effect from one party on the other. This leads to a transition process which can either be taken as positive or negative depending upon the type of transaction or interaction. This process takes three steps to complete. Starting with, the first step, when the action takes place from the leader or manager or sometimes, the supervisor and employee.

However, this usually takes place through an initiation by the manager, and the reaction is then from the employee which can either be in some physical or mental form (Cropanzano et al., [2017](#)). One of the basic tenets of the social exchange theory is that the relationships among the individuals evolve with the passage of time leading to mutual trust, devotion and responsibility. To make this relationship viable and possible, there must be

some form of exchange or transaction (Emerson, [1976](#)).

Ample literature is available upon the positive leadership and its effects on the performance and satisfaction of employees consistent with social and leadership evidences that relate to emotional capitals or reserves (Kalshoven & Boon, [2012](#)). However, there is little data available on the dark side of leadership. Consistent upon the logics and explanation of the latter, the current study aims at checking the relationship between despotic leadership and its negative effect on the wellness or psychological well beings of the employees, which is supported by the social exchange theory (Emerson, [1976](#)).

Examining the relationships of despotic leadership and its effect on the psychological well-being of employees, it has been found from the previous studies that in healthcare industry, when the paramedical staff is on duty, and they are faced with such negative behavior from the leader, there can be a drop in the efficiency of the employees. Such employees keep on bearing their attitude until one day, they leave the organization. This obviously is because the employees feel tired of the repeated behavior of the leader's abusive or tyrant and selfish attitude. Ultimately, employees get tired and exhausted and feel stressed (Harvey et al., [2007](#)).

Despotic leaders are also described as selfish since they never care about the happiness of the other employees and therefore they do not even bother about the well being or happiness of the other employees hence making them lose their interest in job or confidence, so that they cannot do their job due to the low self esteem that the mental strain gives them.(Padilla et al. [2007](#)). Due to this reason, employees' psychological well-being is always on stake. In light of the above argument, a despotic leader who is selfish, ignorant, and harsh in communication, will obviously affect the psychological well-being of the employees in the health care industry.

As the despotic leader is not interested about the well-being, including his say at work, his autonomy, talent and decision making skills, his growth and development, such a type of leader will affect the well-being of his employees and this will, in return affect the working efficiency or capacity of the employees resulting in a negative impact on their working conditions in the health care industry. Empathetic paramedical staff or mentally disturbed staff in health care can in return, show bad behavior or attendance with the patients leading to low profits for the organization or a bad

goodwill. Thus the following hypothesis can be drawn

H₁: Despotic Leadership will have a negative effect on the Psychological Well-being of an employee.

Emotional Exhaustion as Mediator

Looking into the relationship between leadership and emotional exhaustion, there is evidence about a direct relationship pertaining to that (Volmer et al., [2016](#)). A despotic leader leaves subordinates alone to manage all organizational activities, as he himself dictates the rule, discriminates, demotivates, and devalues them by not including them in organizational decision making. This results in emotional exhaustion of the employees (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, [2022](#)), burnout, turnover intention, and negative attitude towards the organization. Sattar and Malik ([2019](#)) are of the view that despotic leaders look down upon employees' emotional needs causing societal and psychological stress in the employee, threatening resources (such as leaders support). This results in an insecure organizational environment for employees causing emotional exhaustion (Nauman et al., [2020](#)). Emotional exhaustion in turn causes life dissatisfaction and low career growth (Kalshoven & Boon, [2012](#)). The individual tries to revolve around coping strategies to manage stress to better their conditions but due to the despotic behavior of the leader, they are not given the needed support, which leads to hopelessness, reduced motivation and social exchange. This results in low emotional resources resulting in a lack of coping abilities in an individual (Perrewé & Ganster, [2011](#)). Therefore, emotional exhaustion is being taken as a mediator in the current study postulating the hypothesis 2 as:

H₂: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and psychological well-being of the employees in health sector.

Interaction Avoidance as Moderator

A form of coping strategy that determines social withdrawal has been found and termed as "Interaction avoidance" which is characterized by a desire to avoid social engagement out of anxiety and a preference to perform activities silently (Asendorpf, [1990](#)).

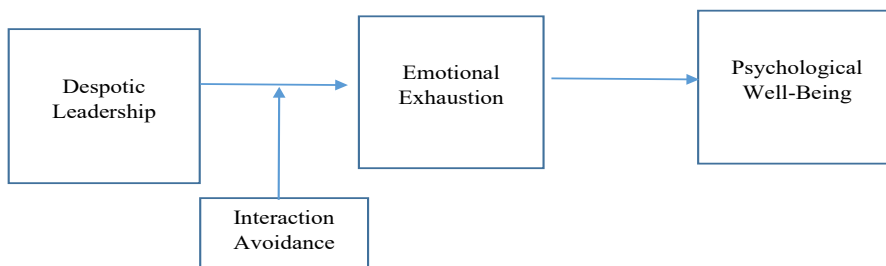
A transactional model of stress and coping was proposed by Lazarus and Folkman ([1991](#)) which suggests that the coping behaviors can either help the victims of despotic leadership to adapt or to resolve the stressful

situations, which in turn affects long term outcomes, such as psychological well-being. Whereas the interaction avoidance can for some time help in reducing stress caused by the despotic leader, it can have negative effects on the psychological well-being of employees in the longer run due to the lack of information about the actual reasons of stress and the patience of holding that stress for long (Ito et al., [2003](#)). Interaction avoidance also demands employees to deal with the despotic leader with some extra effort due to the energy they utilize in coping with that stress which ultimately depletes their mental resources. Hence, this leads to a negative effect on their emotional, mental and physical well-being (Maslach & Leiter, [2008](#)). Based on this rationale, the hypothesis 3 is formulated as follows:

H3: Interaction avoidance moderates the relationship between despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion in such a way that the higher the interaction avoidance, the lower will be the positive effect of despotic leadership on emotional exhaustion.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Methodology

Sample and Procedure

This study has used survey methods for the collection of data. Personally administered questionnaires were used to collect the data from the health care sector. Particularly, nurses, and duty boys as well as front line health workers were picked to fill the questionnaires. The questionnaires were explained thoroughly to the health sector workers so that they understood the type of study and its importance. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed among the employees. Out of those 250, 50

were discarded due to the non-responsive behavior of employees and therefore a total of 154 responses were investigated for results.

According to the behavioral and social science research, the sample size of 250 respondents was based on globally accepted guidelines ensuring sufficient statistical power and misrepresentations. According to Hair et al. (2010), a minimum of 200 respondents is recommended for regression and mediation/moderation analysis using structural equation modeling or PROCESS analysis. Similarly, Cohen (1992) suggests that a sample size between 100–250 provides adequate statistical power (0.80) to detect medium effect sizes at a 5% significance level. Given the study's quantitative nature and the use of Hayes (2013) PROCESS Models 4 and 1, a larger sample was preferable to ensure reliability and validity of the mediation and moderation effects. Thus, 250 questionnaires were distributed to account for potential non-responses or incomplete data, resulting in 154 usable responses, which still met the threshold for robust statistical analysis.

Measures/Instruments/Selection of Material

The data was collected by adopting the questionnaires through different sources for the variables used in the study. The measures were Despotism Leadership, Interaction Avoidance, Emotional Exhaustion, and psychological well-being. The above variables were measured by responses from the employees of the health sector and Likert-scale was used where 1 (*strongly disagree*), 2 (*disagree*), 3 (*neutral*) 4 (*agree*) and 5 (*strongly agree*) determined the answers.

Table 1

Measures and Instruments

Variables	Instruments	<i>k</i>
Despotism Leadership	(De Hoogh & Den Hartog 2008)	9
Interaction Avoidance	(Hu and Shi, 2015; Watson & Friend, 1969)	3
Emotional Exhaustion	(Maslach and Jackson, 1981)	8
Psychological Well-Being	(Diener et al., 2009)	6

Results

This study has used one independent variable that is despotic leadership and one dependent variable that is psychological well-being. Therefore, to check the linearity of this relationship (H1), an analysis was made through regression. Statistically, there are two important values that define the acceptance of the hypothesis or its rejection. Those two indicators are the values of the 'T' test and the value of the 'F' test. In case the values of the t-tests are equal to or greater than 2, and the values of the F-tests are equal to or greater than 4, then the hypothesis is accepted and vice versa.

Table 2

Reliability Analysis

Variables	Reliability	No. of Items
Despotic Leadership (DL)	0.873	9
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	0.876	8
Interaction Avoidance (IA)	0.805	3
Psychological Well-Being (PW)	0.623	6

The Cronbach Alpha was used to check the reliability of the items selected for this study. The values of the Cronbach Alpha for the instruments used in this study were above $\alpha=0.6$ which validates the reliability for which all the values in this study were above 0.60 (Nunnally & Bernstein, [1978](#)).

Factor Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted using principal component analysis with varimax rotation to assess construct validity. Items with loading below 0.50 were removed. Four distinct factors emerged corresponding to Despotic Leadership, Emotional Exhaustion, Interaction Avoidance, and Psychological Well-being, explaining 72% of the total variance. All factor loading ranged between 0.61 and 0.89, indicating acceptable convergent validity. Cronbach's alpha values were, Despotic Leadership ($\alpha = 0.91$) Emotional Exhaustion ($\alpha = 0.88$) Interaction Avoidance ($\alpha = 0.84$) Psychological Well-being ($\alpha = 0.87$). These validated scales were used in subsequent PROCESS Model analyses.

Table 3*Results of Hypothesis 1*

Model	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	1.933	.153		12.625	.000
Despotic Leadership	.119	.055	.174	2.177	.031
<i>R</i> ²	0.30				
<i>F</i> (1, 152)	4.74				
<i>p</i>	.03				

The results of the hypothesis 1 were tested using the linear regression analysis through SPSS 24 and the relationship between Despotic Leadership and Emotional Exhaustion were checked. The table 3 shows the results. Investigating the values of t-test and F-test is an important factor and for this purpose, the values are 12.626 and 2.177 which are greater than 2. Similarly, the values of F-test are 4.739 showing a value greater than 4 which means the relationship is significant. The values of ‘*R*’

In addition, higher values of ‘*R*’ and ‘*R*²’ are (0.17) and (0.030) which shows a weak relationship between DL and PW. As the values of the t-test and the f-test are within the range and positive, it means that the H1 is accepted. To check the linearity between the mediator and moderator in the equation, the PROCESS MACROS is applied to check the linearity (Hayes, 2013). There is one mediating hypothesis in the study which is (H2) and one moderating hypothesis (H3).

H2: Confidence intervals of total, direct and indirect effects of despotic leadership on employee psychological well-being through emotional exhaustion

Table 4*Mediation Hypothesis*

	Effect	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Total Effect	0.11	0.05	2.17	0.01	0.22
Direct Effect	0.01	0.06	2.25	0.15	0.11
	Effect	Boot <i>SE</i>		<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Indirect Effect	0.19	0.06		0.06	0.33

The model by Preacher and Hayes (2013) has been used in this study to check the mediation effect. For this purpose, the Model 4 was selected to

perform mediation. This model calculates the total effects as well as the direct and indirect effects of despotic leadership on psychological well-being of health care sector employees of Pakistan through emotional exhaustion as the mediating variable. The results of the PROCESS MACROS Model 4 shows first the total effect of the mediation which is significant (Effect=0.1190, $t = 2.1769$, IC [0.0110, 0.2269]). Moreover, the direct effect of despotic leadership on psychological well-being is also significant based upon the direct effect results, which are (Effect=0.0176, $t=2.2561$, IC [0.1530, 0.1179]). The indirect effect of despotic leadership on employees' psychological well-being through emotional exhaustion, which is a mediator according to the effect as (Effect = 0.1995, IC [0.0645, 0.3340]), is also significant. After examining the results, it can be concluded that emotional exhaustion partially mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and employees' psychological well-being in the health care sector of Pakistan.

Table 5*Moderation Analysis*

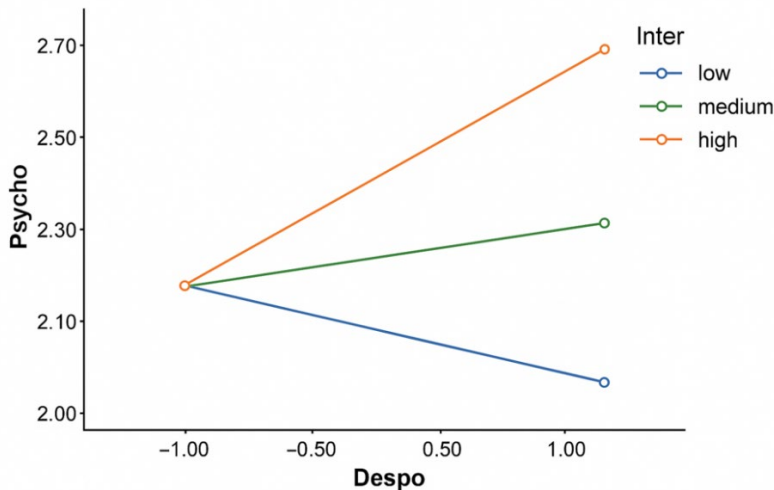
	Coeff	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	0.33	.38	0.87	0.38	.42	1.09
DL	0.79	.15	5.12	0.00	.49	1.10
IA	0.56	.13	4.02	0.00	.28	0.83
Int_1	0.22	.04	4.58	0.00	.32	0.12
Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator						
IA	Effect	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
-1SD	.34	.07	4.43	.00	.19	.50
M	.12	.06	1.83	.06	.00	.24
+1SD	.10	.08	1.23	0.21	.27	.06
R^2	0.15					
$F(3, 150)$	8.99					
<i>p</i>	0.00					

Moderation was applied in this study to check the effect of interaction avoidance upon despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion in the health care sector of Pakistan. For this purpose, the Model 1 of Preacher and Hayes (2013) was used to check the low, average and high effects of interaction avoidance between despotic leadership, and emotional exhaustion in the health sector employees. For this purpose, Model 1 of PROCESS MACROS

was applied. The results showed the values of p (.000) which shows that there is a significant relationship of the interaction avoidance variable the moderator which shows that the model is significant. The model summary also showed the results of R and R^2 which are 0.39 and 0.15 which shows that the interaction avoidance is partially moderating the relationship between despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion. This means that interaction avoidance actually buffers the negative effects of the despotic leadership on emotional exhaustion approving and accepting the hypothesis H3.

Figure 2

Interaction Effect of Despotic Leadership and Interaction Avoidance on Psychological Well-Being



Discussions

In the current study, emotional exhaustion was found as a mediator between despotic leadership and psychological well-being of employees in health care sector of Pakistan and interaction avoidance was found as moderator between despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion in order to find the psychological well-being of employees. Generally, the results corroborate the research model proposed in this study and suggest that the negative effect of despotic leadership behaviors on employees' psychological well-being is direct and indirect. The results corroborate the expectations of the

Social Exchange Theory that assumes that employee relationships within the workplace rely on mutual exchanges. If leaders engage in unfair and authoritative exchanges and are self-serving, employees see the imbalance and feel emotionally strained, causing a worsening of their psychological health (Cropanzano et al., [2017](#)). The results of the study support the first hypothesis which showed that there is a significant relationship between despotic leadership and employees' psychological well-being. The relationship between despotic leadership and employees' mental and psychological health was relatively weak, but statistically significant, suggesting that despotic leadership continues to be a significant factor in predicting employees' mental and psychological health. This finding aligns with previous studies that have associated despotic leadership with authoritarianism, exploitation and self-interest as negative attributes of leadership that impact on employees' attitudes and wellbeing (De Hoogh & Den Hartog [2008](#) ; Nauman et al., [2020](#)).

The results of the recent studies have been similar where they reported that toxic leadership behaviors result in psychologically unsafe workplace, decrease employee's trust on management and affect employee's psychological wellness (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn, [2022](#)). The second hypothesis assumed that emotional exhaustion accounts for the link between despotic leadership and psychological well-being. To support this hypothesis, the mediation analysis revealed that emotional exhaustion is the partial mediator between despotic leadership and employees' psychological well-being. This implies that workers dealing with despotic management over time are likely to become depleted emotionally and therefore more at risk for psychological distress. This study confirmed the findings from the burnout literature that emotional exhaustion is the core of burnout after being exposed to prolonged stress at work (Maslach & Leiter, [2008](#)). They also align with the Conservation of Resources theory that provides a model for how employees who are continuously exposed to stressful work environments can "burn out" their psychological resources, resulting in a decrease in their well-being (Hobfoll et al., [2018](#)).

The results also confirm the third hypothesis that involved interaction avoidance as a moderating variable. Based on the moderation analysis, the results showed that the positive relationship between despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion is reduced when this relationship is moderated by interaction avoidance. Those who purposely reduced contacts with negative

bosses showed a relatively low level of emotional exhaustion compared to those who had regular contacts. This study indicates that avoidance of interactions may be a coping mechanism to reduce short-term psychological distress caused by negative supervisory actions. The outcome confirms the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991) that one's coping responses are aimed at lessening the effects of stressful experiences. Similarly, Ito et al., (2003) suggested that avoiding the problem might temporarily alleviate the emotional load, but would not remove the stressor. The present study can be seen as an important addition to the literature on despotic leadership by not only examining emotional exhaustion as an explanatory mechanism, but by also investigating interaction avoidance as a boundary condition in one theoretical framework. These variables have been studied individually so far, but in the present study the effect of these variables has been analyzed in the context of healthcare services in Pakistan, which further extended the research on despotic leadership and employee well-being in developing economies.

Conclusion

The current study draws important take aways. It has shed light upon the impact of toxic or despotic leadership on the employees' well-being. The findings confirm that despotic leadership negatively impacts the psychological well-being of the employees by making them emotionally exhausted. Emotional exhaustion which is a mediator partially mediates the relationship between despotic leadership through psychological well-being. Interaction avoidance that has been used as a moderator also has a significance in determining the relationship between the despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion. In this study, the interaction avoidance partially mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion. Interaction avoidance, thus, acts as a coping mechanism, buffering mechanism or underlying mechanism to check the relationship between despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion. Employees who avoid their despotic leaders feel highly emotionally exhausted, and this results in an increase in their negative psychological well-being. This mechanism of interaction avoidance which is a buffer can thus be used as a short time mechanism to deal with the despotic leader. On the other end, it can be used as a positive indicator too. By avoiding the despotic leader, he can improve his psychological well-being by being less emotionally exhausted.

Policy makers and administrations should, therefore, look into avenues for improving the behavior of the despotic leader by giving trainings on coping mechanisms to health care practitioners. Communication and counseling is also a key to improve the side effects of the dark leadership. Concluding, the effects of the despotic leader on the psychological well-being of employees are both direct and indirect. Using this study, organizations can design intervention strategies to combat dark leadership, ultimately promoting a happier, growth oriented and productive work environment.

Research Limitations

The current data for this research has been collected on a cross-sectional basis which is one of the major limitations of the study. One other limitation is the response bias. The true outcomes or responses could not be obtained because emotional exhaustion is a construct that can vary over time and can produce different results calling for a longitudinal survey. The selected sector of the study is the health sector which is not the only sector to be studied. Other sectors like education, banking, and telecommunication are also important sectors that can be explored. Positive behavioral traits or variables as mediators or moderators can be added to check the effects of despotic leadership on employee psychological well-being.

Future Research

This study can be researched in different settings and contexts having different cultures and countries apart from Pakistan. The study can use longitudinal methods too so that different levels can be measured with emotional exhaustion and psychological well-being. The current study has used emotional exhaustion as a mediating mechanism whereas many other variables such as emotional labor or emotional turmoil can be used to study the effects on the psychological well-being. Moreover, variables other than psychological well-being can also be studied. Interaction avoidance has been used as a moderating variable which is also a buffering mechanism. Interaction avoidance can be checked by taking it as a positive approach in the future in order to reduce psychological well-being, and also as a negative variable to check the effect on psychological well-being. Sometimes avoidance is not liked by despotic leaders and they, in turn, become more despotic, which can be checked in the future. In the future, other software can be used to check the results apart from SPSS such as Stata, AMOS, and

VOS viewer etc. to check the results.

Research Implications

There are plenty of theoretical contributions in the previous studies and this study also offers some. This study sheds light on the importance of negative side of leadership which is also called as despotic leadership and therefore it gives a relationship with the psychological well-being of employees and emotional exhaustion as a mediating mechanism. However, interaction avoidance has been used as a buffering mechanism in the study to check the underlying reasons regarding the effects of despotic leadership on the well-being of employees through this mechanism.

The behavior of employees in any social setting is due to an exchange that can be with anyone and this can result in either increasing or decreasing the benefits in the organization. Because of a despotic leader, this balance is disturbed, and therefore, the employees' exchange increases the costs of the organization in terms of stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion and at the end, affecting their self-esteem and psychological well-being. Looking at the Social Exchange Theory, the employees when faced with a despotic leader in the healthcare sector, feel emotionally exhausted and have a negative impact on their psychological well-being. Therefore, this is a two way or reciprocated process as in the theory. However, the utilization of interaction avoidance as a moderator acts as a buffering mechanism which can help in reducing the emotional exhaustion which can in return enhance the psychological well-being of employees. Hence in light of this argument, interaction avoidance can act as a two-way interaction between the despotic leader after avoiding him contributing to the two-way exchange and then reducing the psychological well-being and emotional exhaustion which is a strong theoretical implication.

Practical Implications

This study has several practical implications for the human resource specialists, the human resource development specialists and the policy makers in the health-care sector by ameliorating the employee's psychological well-being. One intervention of this study is to devise policies or training programs to improve and promote positive leadership along with empowering employees with mechanisms of emotional intelligence. Moreover, a system of interaction avoidance can be developed if necessary, in such a way that it becomes a positive element in improving

the well-being of the employees.

This study can be looked upon by practicing senior administrative position holders in hospitals that can improve the patient care after the paramedical staff is treated with a good behavior. Therefore, the human resource development department can benefit the most from this study along with human resource management department. The HR should be careful regarding the people they are hiring in terms of positive leaders and not despotic ones by taking proper behavioral and psychological tests at the time of recruitment. Similarly, HRD should train the existing staff to avoid despotic behavior or to correct any such existing behavior through counselling, training, and other mechanisms of grievance labor union etc.

Author Contribution

Jaweria Tariq: Conceptualization, Literature Review, Formal Analysis, Data Interpretation, Writing – Original Draft, Project Administration. **Hafsah Zahur:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing. **Muhammad Ahsan Iqbal:** Validation, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision. **Muhammad Imran Janjua:** Investigation, Data Curation, Resources.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

Funding Details

No funding has been received for this research.

Generative AI Disclosure Statement

The authors did not use any type of generative artificial intelligence software for this research.

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