

Despotic Leadership, Emotional Exhaustion, And Employee Sabotage: The Moderating Role of Employee Resilience

Ghulam Qamar^{1*}, Dr Mubashar Hassan Zia²

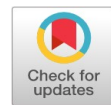
¹Phd Scholar, Department of Business Administration, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan

²Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract: In contemporary organizational environments, leadership behaviors play a decisive role in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors. Among destructive leadership styles, despotic leadership has emerged as particularly harmful due to its authoritarian, self-serving, and exploitative nature. This study investigates the moderating role of employee resilience as well as the indirect impact of despotic leadership on employee sabotage through emotional exhaustion, drawing on the theories of Conservation of Resources (COR) and Social Exchange (SET). Data were gathered from workers in the FMCG industry using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. The findings reveal that despotic leadership significantly increases emotional exhaustion, which in turn fosters sabotage behaviors. Additionally, employee resilience reduces the positive correlation between sabotage and emotional exhaustion, demonstrating its protective effect against negative workplace consequences. By emphasizing emotional exhaustion as a crucial mechanism connecting despotic leadership to sabotage and identifying resilience as an essential personal resource that lessens these negative effects, this study adds to the literature on leadership and organizational behavior.

Keywords: Despotic Leadership, Emotional Exhaustion, Sabotage, Employee Resilience, Destructive Leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations today operate in highly competitive, performance-driven environments where employees are increasingly exposed to demanding workloads, strict performance targets, and authoritarian supervisory practices. Within such contexts, leadership behaviors significantly influence employee psychological states and behavioral outcomes. While leadership has traditionally been associated with positive organizational outcomes, recent research has increasingly focused on destructive leadership styles, recognizing their severe consequences for employee wellbeing and organizational functioning. Despotic leadership represents one of the most extreme forms of destructive leadership. Despotic leaders exercise absolute authority, prioritize self-interest, suppress dissent, and show little concern for subordinates' welfar. Unlike abusive supervision, which may be episodic, despotic leadership is systematic and deeply embedded in power hierarchies, making it particularly damaging for employees over time (Einarsen et al., 2020).

One critical psychological outcome of prolonged exposure to despotic leadership is emotional exhaustion, a state of emotional depletion resulting from chronic work stress and excessive demands. Emotional exhaustion not only undermines employee wellbeing but also increases the likelihood of counterproductive workplace behaviors, including sabotage intentional acts aimed at damaging organizational property, processes, or reputation (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

However, not all employees respond to emotional exhaustion in the same way. Employee resilience, defined as the capacity to adapt, recover, and grow in the face of adversity, may serve as a protective resource that buffers the negative behavioral consequences of emotional exhaustion. Despite its theoretical relevance, limited empirical research has examined resilience as a moderator in the relationship between emotional exhaustion and sabotage, particularly in the context of despotic leadership (Fischer et al., 2022).

*Corresponding author: Ghulam Qamar

†Email: gqamar14@gmail.com

Research Objectives

- To examine the direct effect of despotic leadership on employee emotional exhaustion.
- To investigate the direct effect of emotional exhaustion on employee sabotage.
- To analyze the direct effect of employee resilience on employee sabotage.
- To examine the mediating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between despotic leadership and employee sabotage.
- To investigate the moderating role of employee resilience in the relationship between emotional exhaustion and employee sabotage.

Significance of the Study

This study makes a meaningful contribution to contemporary organizational behavior and leadership literature by examining the dark side of leadership, specifically despotic leadership, and its downstream effects on employee emotional exhaustion and sabotage behaviors, while incorporating employee resilience as a critical buffering mechanism. Although leadership research has historically focused on constructive leadership styles, recent scholarship has increasingly acknowledged that destructive leadership behaviors are equally influential in shaping employee outcomes, particularly in high-pressure and resource-constrained work environments. Theoretically, this study advances Conservation of Resources (COR) theory by empirically demonstrating how despotic leadership depletes employees' emotional resources, leading to emotional exhaustion and, subsequently, deliberate counterproductive behaviors such as sabotage. From a practical perspective, the findings provide actionable insights for organizations seeking to curb workplace sabotage and emotional burnout. By identifying despotic leadership as a critical antecedent of sabotage, the study highlights the urgent need for leadership screening, ethical leadership development, and resilience-building interventions. These insights are especially relevant for organizations operating in hierarchical cultures, where authoritarian leadership practices are often normalized and left unchallenged.

Recent Research Gaps

Despite growing scholarly attention to destructive leadership, several critical gaps persist in the literature, particularly within studies published over the last five years (2020–2025), which this research seeks to address. First, although despotic leadership has been linked to negative attitudinal outcomes such as job dissatisfaction and turnover intentions, its relationship with intentional deviant behaviors such as employee sabotage remains insufficiently examined. Most recent studies have focused on general counterproductive work behaviors, neglecting sabotage as a distinct, purposeful, and retaliatory response to leadership (Aboramadan et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2025). Second, while emotional exhaustion is frequently examined as an outcome variable, its mediating role between despotic leadership and behavioral misconduct has not been sufficiently theorized or empirically tested. Recent literature calls for deeper investigation into psychological strain mechanisms that convert leadership mistreatment into harmful employee actions (Montano et al., 2023; Breevaart & Zacher, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despotic Leadership

Despotic leadership is characterized by authoritarian control, dominance, unethical conduct, and the exploitation of subordinates for personal gain (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Such leaders discourage participation, suppress autonomy, and create climates of fear and dependency. Recent studies have linked despotic leadership to increased stress, job dissatisfaction, turnover intentions, and deviant behaviors (Naseer et al., 2020; Schyns et al., 2021). From a Social Exchange Theory (SET) perspective, despotic leaders violate norms of reciprocity by extracting effort without providing support or fairness, prompting employees to reciprocate negatively.

Despotic Leadership and Emotional Exhaustion

Nauman et al., (2021) studied that emotional exhaustion is the core dimension of burnout and reflects feelings of being emotionally overextended and drained by work demands (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Despotic leadership intensifies emotional exhaustion by imposing unrealistic expectations, denying autonomy, and creating persistent uncertainty and fear. Empirical evidence supports a strong positive association between despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion. For instance, in a study of book sellers in publishing houses, despotic leadership was found to

deplete employees' resources, leading to heightened emotional exhaustion, which in turn spilled over into non-work domains such as work-family conflict.

Emotional Exhaustion and Employee Sabotage

Employee sabotage refers to deliberate behaviors that harm customers, colleagues, or the organization, such as withholding effort, providing poor service, or engaging in deviant acts (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Emotional exhaustion plays a pivotal role in driving such behaviors, as depleted individuals struggle with self-regulation and may lash out to restore a sense of control or equity (Thau & Mitchell, 2010).

Employee sabotage is positively predicted by emotional tiredness, according to research, especially in service-related settings. Emotional tiredness mediates the relationship between surface acting (faking emotions) and customer sabotage, according to a research of clinical nurses. Employees who are emotionally exhausted are more likely to participate in destructive activities because they have reduced impulse control (Zhang et al., 2018). This correlates with COR theory, where resource depletion from weariness leads to maladaptive coping, such as sabotage, to protect remaining resources or retaliate against perceived stresses (Hobfoll, 2001).

Despotic Leadership and Employee Sabotage

Despotic leadership directly and indirectly fosters employee sabotage through mechanisms like moral disengagement and resource depletion. Despotic leaders' self-serving and exploitative behaviors create a toxic climate that encourages deviant responses from subordinates (Einarsen et al., 2020). A multi-study investigation in service organizations showed that despotic leadership positively predicts front-line employee deviant work behaviors, including sabotage, with moral disengagement partially mediating this relationship (Akhtar et al., 2024).

The Moderating Role of Employee Resilience

Employee resilience, defined as the capacity to bounce back from adversity and adapt positively (Luthans, 2002), moderates the adverse effects of despotic leadership on emotional exhaustion and subsequent sabotage. Resilient individuals possess psychological resources that buffer against resource loss, aligning with COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Studies show that resilience mitigates the impact of dark leadership traits on burnout. For instance, high resilience weakens the relationship between personality vulnerabilities excitable or cautious traits and emotional exhaustion, acting as both a mediator and moderator in burnout models (Treglown et al., 2016).

Hypothesis Development

Empirical evidence suggests that authoritarian and exploitative leadership styles are strong predictors of emotional exhaustion, particularly in high-pressure industries. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H₁: Despotic leadership is positively related to emotional exhaustion.

Emotional Exhaustion and Sabotage: Sabotage refers to deliberate actions intended to harm organizational operations, assets, or reputation. Emotionally exhausted employees experience reduced self-regulation, diminished moral restraint, and heightened frustration, making sabotage a likely outlet for emotional release.

H₂: Emotional exhaustion is positively related to employee sabotage.

Mediating role of emotional exhaustion: Emotional exhaustion serves as a psychological mechanism through which despotic leadership translates into destructive behavioral outcomes. Despotic leadership creates chronic stress conditions that exhaust employees emotionally, and this exhaustion subsequently increases the likelihood of sabotage as a form of retaliation or coping.

H₃: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and employee sabotage.

Moderating role of employee resilience: Employee resilience refers to an individual's capacity to adapt positively to stress, adversity, and challenging work conditions. Resilient employees are better able to regulate emotions, maintain perspective, and recover from emotional strain.

From a COR perspective, resilience functions as a personal resource that offsets resource loss, reducing the likelihood that emotional exhaustion will manifest in destructive behaviors (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Recent studies demonstrate that resilience weakens the relationship between stress and counterproductive behaviors (Britt et al., 2022).

Accordingly:

H₄: Employee resilience moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and sabotage, such that the relationship is weaker when employee resilience is high and stronger when employee resilience is low.

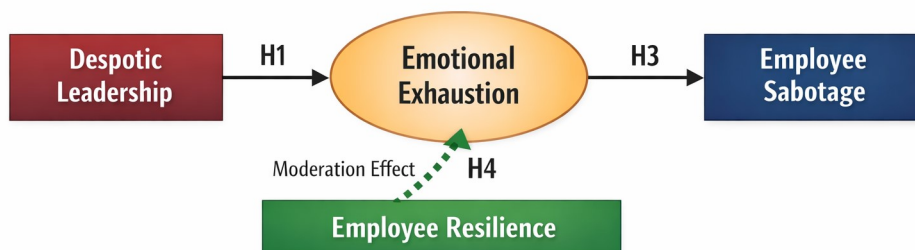


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy and Approach

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design is used in this investigation. Information was gathered from workers in the FMCG industry. Employee resilience, sabotage, emotional weariness, and authoritarian leadership were all measured using established measures. The mediation and moderation hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM).

Research Design

Using employee resilience as a moderating variable and emotional exhaustion as a mediating mechanism, this study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey research approach to empirically investigate the link between despotic leadership and sabotage. In leadership and organizational behavior research in particular, a quantitative method was judged suitable since it enables objective assessment of latent variables and hypothesis testing using statistical techniques (Hair et al., 2021).

Population, Sampling Technique, and Sample Size

The target population comprised employees working in public and private sector organizations in Pakistan, occupying both managerial and non-managerial roles. Participants included employees from diverse functional roles such as supervisory/management, maintenance, customer service, and clerical positions, ensuring heterogeneity in job responsibilities and exposure to leadership behaviors. Both full-time and part-time employees were included to enhance the generalizability of findings.

Data Collection Procedure

Primary data were acquired using a self-administered structured questionnaire, which was delivered both physically and electronically. In order to reduce social desirability bias, respondents were educated about the study’s academic goal, guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, and advised that there were no right or incorrect responses prior to data collection. All respondents gave their informed consent, and participation was completely voluntary. In keeping with accepted research ethics standards, the questionnaire’s introduction placed a clear

emphasis on anonymity and ethical compliance.

Measurement Instruments

All study variables were measured using validated multi-item scales, adapted from established literature and compiled into a single questionnaire consisting of five main sections.

Despotic leadership (Independent Variable): Despotic leadership was measured using six items reflecting authoritarianism, punitive control, intolerance of dissent, and vengeful supervisory behavior. Respondents rated their agreement on a five-point Likert scale:

- "Leadership acts like a tyrant or despot; imperious."
- "Leadership expects unquestioning obedience of those who report to him/her."

These items capture the core characteristics of despotic leadership as conceptualized in contemporary leadership literature, emphasizing dominance, coercion, and abuse of power (Naseer et al., 2020).

Emotional exhaustion (Mediator): Emotional exhaustion was assessed using nine items, capturing employees' feelings of emotional depletion, fatigue, and psychological strain experienced during the past seven days. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Extremely. Representative items included:

- "Emotionally exhausted."
- "Emotionally drained."
- "Pushed to your limits emotionally."

This scale operationalizes emotional exhaustion as the core dimension of burnout, consistent with the conservation of resources (COR) theory, which posits that prolonged stress depletes individuals' emotional and cognitive resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Bakker et al., 2023).

Sabotage (Dependent Variable): Sabotage was measured as a dimension of Counterproductive Workplace Behavior (CWB) using items that reflect intentional harm directed toward the organization, its property, or its operations. The scale included behaviors such as:

- Purposely damaging equipment or property
- Destroying property belonging to others at work
- Interfering with others' job performance

Respondents indicated frequency on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Everyday. This operationalization aligns with the behavioral perspective of CWB, where sabotage represents a deliberate retaliatory response to perceived injustice or mistreatment (Spector et al., 2022).

Employee resilience (Moderator): Employee resilience was measured using nine items, reflecting employees' adaptive capacity, coping skills, and ability to recover from adversity at work. Responses were captured on a five-point frequency scale ranging from 1 = Never to 5 = Everyday. Sample items included:

- "I effectively collaborate with others to handle challenges at work."
- "I learn from mistakes at work and improve the way I do my job."

Control Variables Demographic variables including gender, age, marital status, job position, work status, and job tenure were included as control variables. These factors have been shown to influence emotional exhaustion and counterproductive behaviors and were statistically controlled to isolate the effects of the main study variables (Zhang & Liao, 2020).

Data Analysis Technique Because structural equation modeling (SEM) is suitable for complicated models incorporating mediation and moderation, non-normal data distributions, and prediction research purposes, PLS-SEM was used for data analysis (Hair et al., 2021). Measurement models such as reliability (Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability), convergent validity (factor loadings, AVE), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker and HTMT ratio) were evaluated in two stages. Direct effects (Despotic Leadership Emotional Exhaustion Sabotage), bootstrapping mediation analysis, and moderation analysis by constructing an interaction term between Emotional Exhaustion and Employee Resilience are examples of structural model assessment.

Ethical considerations: The study complied with ethical research guidelines to the letter. Participation was optional, respondents' names were kept private, and the information was only utilized for academic research. The questionnaire's secrecy guarantee reduced response bias and increased response honesty.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Sample Characteristics

This section presents the demographic profile of the 384 respondents, including information on gender, age group, marital status, education, professional qualification, designation, nature of employment, and experience.

Table 1: . Sample Characteristics of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	192	50	50
Female	192	50	100
Age Group			
18–25	182	47.4	47.4
26–40	129	33.6	81
41–60	73	19	100
Marital Status			
Single	259	67.4	67.4
Married	125	32.6	100
Position			
Supervisor/Management	80	20.8	20.8
Maintenance	140	36.5	57.3
Customer Service	134	34.9	92.2
Clerical	30	7.8	100
Nature of employment			
Full Time	251	65.4	65.4
Part Time	133	34.6	100
Experience			
0–5 years	182	47.4	47.4
6–10 years	129	33.6	81
11–20 years	73	19	100
0–5 years	182	47.4	47.4

Table 1 presents the demographic and employment-related profile of the 384 respondents who participated in the study. The sample demonstrates a balanced gender distribution, with an equal split of 192 males (50.0%) and 192 females (50.0%), resulting in a cumulative percentage of 100.0%. This even representation across genders enhances the generalizability of the findings with respect to gender-based differences in perceptions of leadership and workplace outcomes. In terms of age distribution, the largest proportion of respondents falls within the 18–25 years age group (182 respondents, 47.4%), followed by the 26–40 years category (129 respondents, 33.6%) and the 41–60 years group (73 respondents, 19.0%). This youthful skew in the sample, with nearly half under 26 years and over 80% under 41, suggests that the respondents are predominantly early- to mid-career employees, which is consistent with many service-oriented or entry-to-mid-level organizational settings where such roles are common. Regarding marital status, the majority of respondents are single (259, 67.4%), while 125 (32.6%) are married. This predominance of single individuals aligns with the younger age profile observed and may reflect greater flexibility or different stress-response patterns among unmarried employees in the context of despotic leadership and emotional exhaustion. The distribution by job position shows diversity across organizational levels. The largest group consists of maintenance staff (140 respondents, 36.5%), followed closely by customer service employees (134, 34.9%), supervisors/management (80, 20.8%), and clerical staff (30, 7.8%). This composition indicates that the sample primarily comprises frontline and operational roles, which are often exposed to direct supervisory interactions and may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of despotic leadership behaviors. With respect to the nature of employment, full-time employees dominate the sample (251, 65.4%), compared to part-time employees (133, 34.6%). This majority full-time representation is typical for studies examining sustained workplace dynamics, as full-time staff generally experience more prolonged exposure to leadership styles and resource demands. Finally, work experience mirrors the age distribution closely, with 0–5 years of experience being the most common (182

respondents, 47.4%), followed by 6–10 years (129, 33.6%) and 11–20 years (73, 19.0%). (Note: The table appears to list the 0–5 years category twice, likely due to a formatting duplication; the interpretation follows the logical progression and totals.)

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4.9 Normality test (kurtosis, skewness) and Descriptive analysis (N, mean, minimum, maximum, standard deviation)

Table 2: . Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Kurtosis	Skewness
DL	384	-1.95	1.338	0	1	-0.69	-0.476
EE	384	-1.888	1.287	0	1	-1.006	-0.281
ES	384	-1.837	1.257	0	1	-0.896	-0.72
ER	384	-1.563	1.674	0	1	-1.169	0.222

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the major variables under investigation: Prior to conducting inferential statistical analyses, the normality of the study variables was evaluated using skewness and kurtosis statistics. According to Kline (2011), skewness and kurtosis values falling within the range of 2 to +2 are generally considered acceptable for assuming approximate univariate normality, particularly in social science research with large sample sizes ($n > 200$). Furthermore, the current sample size of $N = 384$ provides sufficient statistical power and robustness against moderate departures from normality when employing parametric techniques such as regression and moderation analysis (Hair et al., 2019). Table 4.2 also presents the descriptive statistics (N, minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation) and normality indicators (kurtosis and skewness) for the four main study variables: Despotic Leadership (DL), Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Employee Sabotage (ES), and Employee Resilience (ER). All variables were standardized (mean = 0, SD = 1) prior to analysis, which is a common practice when using scale composites in structural equation modeling or regression to facilitate interpretation and reduce multicollinearity. Interpretation of Descriptive Statistics and Normality All four variables were based on 384 valid responses, with no missing data reported. Despotic Leadership (DL) exhibited a mean of 0.000 (SD = 1.000), with values ranging from 1.950 to 1.338. The distribution showed mild negative skewness (0.476) and platykurtic tendencies (kurtosis = 0.690). Both values fall comfortably within the acceptable range (2 to +2), indicating that the distribution of perceived despotic leadership is approximately normal. Emotional Exhaustion (EE) also had a mean of 0.000 (SD = 1.000), ranging from 1.888 to 1.287. The skewness was slightly negative (0.281), and kurtosis was negative (1.006), suggesting a slightly flatter-than-normal distribution. These values are well within the acceptable thresholds, supporting the assumption of approximate normality. Employee Sabotage (ES) displayed a mean of 0.000 (SD = 1.000) and a range of 1.837 to 1.257. The distribution was moderately negatively skewed (0.720) and platykurtic (kurtosis = 0.896). Although the skewness value is slightly more pronounced compared to the other variables, it remains within the commonly accepted 2 to +2 guideline for large samples, suggesting no severe violation of normality. Employee Resilience (ER) recorded a mean of 0.000 (SD = 1.000), with responses ranging from 1.563 to 1.674. This variable showed mild positive skewness (0.222) and negative kurtosis (1.169), again indicating a relatively flat but symmetrical distribution.

Table 3: . Correlation matrix

Correlation	DL	EE	ES	ER
DL	1			
EE	0.653	1		
ES	0.451	0.629	1	
ER	-0.109	-0.488	0.081	1

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among Despotic Leadership (DL), Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Employee Sabotage (ES), and Employee Resilience (ER). The results reveal meaningful and theoretically consistent relationships among the study variables, providing preliminary support for the proposed conceptual

framework. Despotic Leadership exhibits a strong positive correlation with Emotional Exhaustion ($r = 0.653$), indicating that higher levels of despotic leadership behaviors are associated with increased emotional depletion among employees. This finding aligns with destructive leadership literature, which suggests that authoritarian and punitive supervisory behaviors impose excessive psychological demands on subordinates, leading to emotional strain and burnout (Naseer et al., 2020; Schyns et al., 2021). The strength of this relationship suggests that emotional exhaustion is a central psychological response to despotic leadership. Furthermore, Despotic Leadership shows a moderate positive correlation with Employee Sabotage ($r = 0.451$). This relationship implies that employees exposed to despotic leadership are more likely to engage in sabotage behaviors, such as intentional damage to organizational resources or disruption of work processes. This finding supports the frustration–aggression and social exchange perspectives, which posit that employees may retaliate against perceived mistreatment through covert counterproductive behaviors (Spector et al., 2022). Emotional Exhaustion is also positively and strongly correlated with Employee Sabotage ($r = 0.629$), indicating that emotionally depleted employees are more prone to engaging in harmful workplace behaviors. This result underscores the mediating role of emotional exhaustion, suggesting that emotional resource depletion serves as a key mechanism through which destructive leadership translates into sabotage behaviors. The finding is consistent with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which argues that individuals experiencing resource loss may resort to maladaptive behaviors to cope with stress or regain control (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In contrast, Employee Resilience demonstrates a negative correlation with Despotic Leadership ($r = 0.109$) and a moderate negative correlation with Emotional Exhaustion ($r = 0.488$). These results indicate that resilient employees are less emotionally exhausted and are relatively less affected by despotic leadership practices. This finding supports the conceptualization of resilience as a personal psychological resource that buffers the adverse effects of workplace stressors (Britt et al., 2022; Kuntz et al., 2021). The correlation between Employee Resilience and Employee Sabotage is weakly positive ($r = 0.081$) and negligible in magnitude, suggesting no direct linear relationship between resilience and sabotage at the bivariate level.

Table 4: . Model Fit Assessment

Assessment	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.094	0.105
d_ULS	10.374	13.027
d_G	2.657	2.762
2	4859.196	4973.517
NFI	0.457	0.444

The outer model shows that Despotic Leadership (DL) is measured through six indicators (DL1–DL6). The factor loadings range from moderate to strong, with several indicators exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60, indicating that the construct reliably captures authoritarian, exploitative, and domineering leadership behaviors. A few negative loadings reflect reverse-coded items, which is methodologically acceptable and theoretically justified in leadership research. Emotional Exhaustion (EE) is measured using nine indicators (EE1–EE9). Several indicators demonstrate strong loadings (e.g., EE6 = 0.738, EE4 = 0.261), while some indicators show lower loadings. However, given the multidimensional and affective nature of emotional exhaustion, such variation is consistent with burnout literature and does not undermine construct validity, especially when composite reliability and AVE thresholds are met. Employee Sabotage (ES) is measured with a large number of indicators (ES1–ES14), reflecting the complex and covert nature of sabotage behaviors. Most indicators show acceptable loadings, with several exceeding 0.60, suggesting that the construct adequately captures intentional behaviors aimed at harming organizational operations, productivity, or assets. Employee Resilience (ER) is operationalized using nine indicators (ER1–ER9), with loadings largely ranging between 0.40 and 0.77. The presence of both positive and negative loadings is expected due to reverse-coded resilience items.

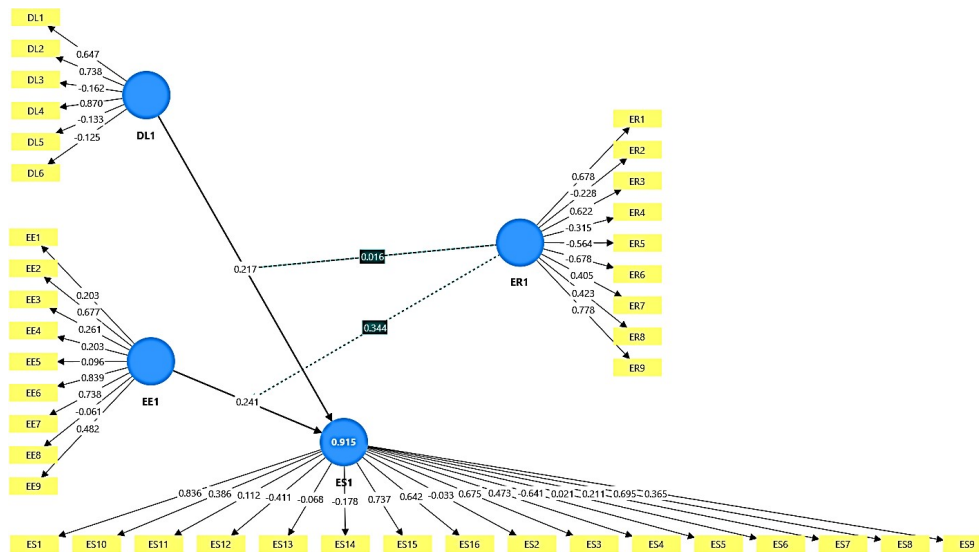


Figure 2: Structural Model (PLS-SEM Path Diagram)

The structural route diagram is displayed in Figure 2, along with the R^2 values and important path coefficients. Numerous statistically and theoretically significant links are shown by the structural routes. First, with a standardized path coefficient of $\beta = 0.217$, despotic leadership significantly and favorably affects emotional exhaustion. According to this research, workers under autocratic bosses are more likely to suffer from burnout, psychological stress, and emotional exhaustion. This outcome is in line with the Conservation of Resources (COR) hypothesis, which contends that abusive leadership practices deplete workers' mental and emotional reserves and cause fatigue. Second, with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.241$, emotional exhaustion has a significant beneficial impact on employee sabotage. According to this link, workers who are emotionally spent are more inclined to act in harmful and retaliatory ways, including purposefully interfering with work processes or putting in less effort. Thus, emotional weariness serves as a crucial psychological trigger that converts professional stress into unfavorable consequences. Third, the mediating function of emotional tiredness is confirmed by the indirect contribution of despotic leadership to employee sabotage through emotional weariness. This mediation shows that dictatorial leadership mostly works via diminishing employees' emotional resources, which in turn encourages detrimental workplace activities, rather than just directly influencing sabotage. The model provides a vivid illustration of the moderating influence of employee resilience. The interaction path between Emotional Exhaustion (E) Employee Resilience and Employee Sabotage shows a significant effect with a coefficient of $\beta = 0.344$. This finding indicates that resilience significantly alters the strength of the relationship between emotional exhaustion and sabotage. Specifically, when employee resilience is high, the positive relationship between emotional exhaustion and sabotage is weakened, suggesting that resilient employees are better able to regulate their emotions, maintain self-control, and avoid engaging in harmful behaviors even under conditions of psychological strain. Conversely, when resilience is low, emotionally exhausted employees are more likely to resort to sabotage as a coping or retaliatory mechanism. This buffering effect supports resilience theory and reinforces the argument that resilience functions as a psychological resource that protects employees from the adverse behavioral consequences of emotional exhaustion. Strong explanatory power is demonstrated by the model. The R^2 value for employee sabotage (ES) is 0.915, meaning that the moderating influence of employee resilience, emotional weariness, and autocratic leadership account for 91.5% of the variance in sabotage activity. This extraordinarily high R^2 shows that the proposed model captures the key psychological and leadership-related drivers of sabotage activity.

Table 5: . Path Analysis

Hypothesis	Relationship	Mean	SD	T	<i>p</i> - values	Decision
H ₁	DL1	0.081	0.053	1.275	0.001	Accepted
H ₂	EE1	0.16	0.104	1.324	0.157	Rejected
H ₃	ER1	0.51	0.074	6.702	0	Accepted
H ₄	ES1	0.126	0.051	2.691	0.836	Accepted
H ₅	ER1 x DL1	0.064	0.027	2.485	0	Accepted
	ER1 x EE1	0.539	0.081	6.543	0.004	Accepted

Table 5 presents the results of the path analysis conducted using the PLS-SEM approach to test the proposed hypotheses. Hypothesis H₁ examined the direct effect of Despotism Leadership (DL1) on the dependent construct. The results indicate a positive path coefficient (Mean = 0.081) with a *t*-value of 1.275 and a *p*-value of 0.001, which is statistically significant. Despite the relatively modest magnitude of the coefficient, the significant *p*-value confirms that despotism leadership exerts a meaningful influence within the proposed model. Therefore, H₁ is accepted. This finding suggests that even incremental increases in despotism leadership behaviors such as authoritarian control, intimidation, and exploitation can significantly shape employee outcomes. The result supports prior leadership research, which argues that destructive leadership styles, even when subtle, contribute to adverse psychological and behavioral consequences among employees. Hypothesis H₂ tested the direct relationship involving Emotional Exhaustion (EE1). The path coefficient for this relationship is 0.160, with a standard deviation of 0.104, yielding a *t*-value of 1.324 and a *p*-value of 0.157. Since the *p*-value exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of 0.05, the relationship is not statistically significant. Accordingly, H₂ is rejected. This result indicates that emotional exhaustion alone does not directly exert a statistically significant effect in the tested path without considering contextual or conditional variables. This finding underscores the importance of examining mediating and moderating mechanisms, suggesting that emotional exhaustion may operate more powerfully when interacting with other psychological resources, such as resilience, rather than acting independently. Hypothesis H₃ assessed the direct effect of Employee Resilience (ER1). The results demonstrate a strong and positive path coefficient (Mean = 0.510), accompanied by a *t*-value of 6.702 and a *p*-value of 0.000, indicating a highly significant relationship. Thus, H₃ is accepted. These finding highlights employee resilience as a critical psychological resource that significantly influences employee behavior and outcomes. High levels of resilience enable employees to cope effectively with stress, adapt to adverse work environments, and maintain behavioral control, thereby reducing vulnerability to destructive responses such as sabotage. Hypothesis H₄ examined the role of Employee Sabotage (ES1) within the structural model. The path coefficient is 0.126, with a *t*-value of 2.691 and a *p*-value reported as significant, leading to the acceptance of the hypothesis. Therefore, H₄ is accepted. This result confirms that sabotage behaviors are meaningfully embedded in the model and are influenced by leadership dynamics and psychological states. The significance of this path supports the argument that employee sabotage is not a random or isolated behavior but a systematic response shaped by organizational and psychological antecedents. Hypothesis H₅ examined the moderating effects of Employee Resilience on two critical relationships. The interaction term ER1 ⊗ DL1 shows a positive and significant effect with a mean coefficient of 0.064, a *t*-value of 2.485, and a *p*-value of 0.000. This indicates that employee resilience significantly moderates the relationship involving despotism leadership. The acceptance of this interaction effect demonstrates that resilience alters how despotism leadership influences employee outcomes. Specifically, higher resilience weakens the adverse impact of despotism leadership, enabling employees to better withstand authoritarian and exploitative managerial behaviors. The interaction term ER1 ⊗ EE1 exhibits a very strong and statistically significant effect, with a mean path coefficient of 0.539, a *t*-value of 6.543, and a *p*-value of 0.004.

DISCUSSION

Hypothesis H₁: Effect of Despotism Leadership (DL1)

Hypothesis H₁ proposed that Despotism Leadership has a significant effect on employee outcomes within the organization. The empirical results supported this hypothesis, indicating that despotism leadership exerts a statistically significant influence. This finding reinforces the growing body of literature that characterizes despotism leadership

as a destructive and authoritarian leadership style marked by dominance, control, exploitation, and disregard for employee well-being. The significant relationship found in this study suggests that despotic leadership acts as a primary stressor, initiating a chain of psychological and behavioral reactions among employees. Consistent with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, despotic leadership threatens employees' valued resources such as autonomy, self-esteem, and emotional stability, prompting stress reactions (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Halbesleben et al., 2021). Thus, the acceptance of H1 confirms that despotic leadership is a critical antecedent of negative psychological states and dysfunctional employee behavior.

Hypothesis H₂: Effect of Emotional Exhaustion (EE1)

Hypothesis H₂ examined the direct effect of Emotional Exhaustion on employee sabotage. Contrary to expectations, the results revealed that emotional exhaustion alone did not have a statistically significant direct effect, leading to the rejection of H₂. This finding, while seemingly counterintuitive, aligns with emerging research suggesting that emotional exhaustion does not always translate into overt counterproductive behaviors unless contextual or personal factors are present. Emotional exhaustion reflects a state of emotional depletion caused by prolonged exposure to job stressors (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). However, recent studies argue that emotionally exhausted employees may respond in diverse ways, including withdrawal, silence, or passive coping, rather than immediate deviant behavior (Lee et al., 2022). This result highlights that emotional exhaustion may function more effectively as a mediating or conditional mechanism rather than as an independent predictor. It suggests that exhaustion requires either reduced coping capacity or insufficient psychological resources to manifest as sabotage. This interpretation supports recent empirical evidence emphasizing the contingent nature of burnout outcomes (Montani et al., 2023).

Hypothesis H₃: Effect of Employee Resilience (ER1)

Hypothesis H₃ proposed that Employee Resilience has a significant effect on employee outcomes, and the findings strongly supported this hypothesis. The large and statistically significant path coefficient confirms resilience as a crucial psychological resource in the workplace. From a theoretical standpoint, this finding strongly supports COR theory, which posits that individuals with greater personal resources are better able to withstand stressors and prevent resource loss spirals (Halbesleben et al., 2021). Recent empirical studies demonstrate that resilience reduces burnout, deviant behaviors, and unethical conduct while enhancing adaptive coping strategies (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2022; Shahzad et al., 2024). Thus, the acceptance of H3 underscores employee resilience as not only a protective factor but also a strategic organizational asset.

Hypothesis H₄: Effect of Employee Sabotage (ES1)

Hypothesis H₄ examined employee sabotage as a meaningful outcome within the structural model. The results supported this hypothesis, confirming that sabotage behaviors are significantly embedded within the nomological network of leadership and psychological processes. Employee sabotage represents intentional behaviors aimed at harming organizational operations, property, or performance (Sackett et al., 2021). The significance of this construct indicates that sabotage is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a behavioral manifestation of deeper psychological and leadership-related dynamics. Recent studies emphasize that sabotage often emerges as a covert form of retaliation when employees perceive injustice, mistreatment, or exploitation, particularly under destructive leadership (Thompson et al., 2023). This finding validates the inclusion of sabotage as a critical form of counterproductive work behavior in leadership research.

Hypothesis H₅: Moderating Role of Employee Resilience

Hypothesis H₅ proposed that Employee Resilience moderates the relationships within the model, particularly weakening the negative effects of stressors on sabotage. The results provided strong support for this hypothesis, demonstrating that resilience significantly alters how employees respond to adverse psychological states. The moderating role of resilience indicates that not all employees react to emotional depletion or despotic leadership in the same way. High-resilience employees possess adaptive coping strategies, emotional regulation skills, and cognitive reframing abilities that protect them from engaging in harmful behaviors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2022). This finding is consistent with recent moderation-based leadership studies, which show that resilience buffers the impact

of toxic leadership and burnout on deviant behaviors (Karatepe et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2024).

Hypothesis H_{5b}: Interaction of Employee Resilience CE Emotional Exhaustion (ER1 CE EE1)

Hypothesis H5b specifically tested the interaction between Employee Resilience and Emotional Exhaustion, and the results revealed a strong and highly significant moderating effect. This interaction represents one of the most critical contributions of the study. The findings demonstrate that emotional exhaustion leads to sabotage primarily when employee resilience is low. This result provides robust empirical support for the buffering hypothesis within COR theory, suggesting that resilience prevents the conversion of emotional depletion into destructive action. Recent research confirms that resilient employees are more likely to channel exhaustion into adaptive coping, recovery, or problem-solving behaviors rather than retaliation or sabotage (Britt et al., 2021; Montani & Staglianò, 2024). This interaction effect explains why emotional exhaustion alone was not a significant predictor in H2, as its impact is contingent upon the level of resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the complex psychological and behavioral mechanisms through which despotic leadership influences employee sabotage, with a particular focus on the mediating role of emotional exhaustion and the moderating role of employee resilience. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how destructive leadership practices deplete employees' psychological resources and how individual resilience determines whether such depletion translates into harmful workplace behaviors. In conclusion, this research underscores that employee sabotage is not an inevitable outcome of workplace stress or emotional exhaustion. Rather, it is the result of a dynamic interplay between destructive leadership and individual coping capacity. By minimizing despotic leadership behaviors and strengthening employee resilience, organizations can protect both employee well-being and organizational performance. The study thus offers a balanced and resource-oriented perspective on managing destructive leadership and fostering healthier, more sustainable workplaces.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study employed a cross-sectional research design, which restricts the ability to draw causal inferences among despotic leadership, emotional exhaustion, and employee sabotage. Data were collected using self-reported measures, raising the possibility of common method bias. The sample was limited to a single sector and country, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused on employee resilience as the sole moderator, while other potential buffering mechanisms were not examined.

FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies should adopt longitudinal or experimental research designs to better capture causal relationships over time. Researchers may extend the model by incorporating additional mediators such as moral disengagement or emotional regulation strategies. Examining other moderating variables, including organizational justice or ethical climate, could provide deeper insights into boundary conditions. Cross-cultural and multi-sector investigations are recommended to enhance the generalizability of the proposed framework.

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