



From Toxic Traits to Toxic Workplaces: The Mediating Role of Abusive Supervision on Supervisors' Dark Triad and Employee Cynicism, and Organizational Sustainable Performance

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Abstract

Dark triad leadership has been linked to drastic consequences globally. This study investigates the influence of supervisors' Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) on organizational sustainable performance (OSP) through abusive supervision and employee cynicism, with artificial intelligence (AI) adoption as a moderator. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and Social Exchange Theory (SET), data from 450 employees in Pakistani SMEs were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The study's results reveal that supervisor narcissism and psychopathy significantly increase abusive supervision, while Machiavellianism unexpectedly reduces it. Abusive supervision triggers employee cynicism, which subsequently reduces OSP. The findings also illustrate that abusive supervision and employee cynicism sequentially mediate the effects of narcissism and psychopathy on OSP. AI adoption moderates the damaging impact of cynicism on OSP. Theoretical contributions include validating Dark Triad-driven serial mediation pathways in an understudied context and demonstrating AI's moderating role in mitigating cynicism. Practical implications suggest psychometric screening for Dark Triad traits in leadership, AI-integrated transparency tools, and robust accountability mechanisms to curb abuse and foster sustainable performance.

1 Introduction

Leadership has been widely studied in the social sciences and business, and a majority of studies have focused on supervisory styles and supervisors' behaviors, such as ethical leadership (Bhatti et al., 2021), transformational leadership (Agazu et al., 2025), and authentic leadership (Hoang et al., 2025). However, researchers have also begun focusing on the dark side of leadership over the past few decades. Destructive leadership has been described as a harmful leadership style that has adverse consequences for employees and

organizations in the long run (Shahzad et al., 2024). In destructive leadership, the leaders exhibit negative personality traits such as narcissism, bullying, social undermining, and abusive supervision that reduce organizational sustainability performance. Past studies report that coping strategies, such as surface acting and ingratiation, may help minimize the effects of abusive supervision (Liu et al., 2025) and promote sustainable organizational performance. However, Prior studies have ignored the coping strategies towards abusive supervision (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). This study has taken ingratiation as a coping strategy to explore the association between a dark triad supervisor and abusive supervision. Prior studies have documented that abusive supervision has a range of negative consequences; however, the impact of the consequences of abusive supervision on organizational sustainable performance needs attention (Fernandes et al., 2024; Marchant-Pérez et al., 2024), and therefore, this study will examine the role of mediators (employee cynicism and gossip) on abusive supervision and organizational sustainable performance. AI plays a crucial role in promoting knowledge sharing, organizational sustainable performance, and organizational creativity (Gazi et al., 2024). Therefore, it can be suggested that AI can play a significant role in mitigating counterproductive work behaviors such as abusive supervision, employee cynicism, and the tendency to gossip. Thus, the study will examine the moderating role of AI on the association between employee cynicism and organizational sustainable performance, and between the tendency to gossip and organizational sustainable performance.

Most Employees experience the case of “Mondays” and feel reluctant to start the week. However, employees who are victims of workplace abuse are highly reluctant to go to the office every day. Lount Jr et al. (2024) report that 10-30% of employees in the USA experience social undermining and abusive supervision at work. Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision as “subordinates’ perception of the display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviors by the supervisors at the workplace, excluding physical violence”. Researchers have also claimed that organizations bear financial losses due to abusive workplace behaviors. (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024) conducted a meta-analysis and reported decreased employees' work performance and impaired wellbeing. The same was also reported by Marchant-Pérez et al. (2024). Initially, the first wave of research in abusive supervision focused on examining the impact of abusive supervision on employees, organizations, and society. However, later, researchers diverted their attention to identifying the determinants of abusive supervision (Liu et al., 2025). Abusive supervision

has numerous negative consequences for employees' well-being worldwide. This issue is more prominent in developing countries, particularly in Pakistan's SMEs. Past studies state that certain variables promote abusive behaviors and categorize them under work-related factors and non-work-related factors. These antecedents may include various self-regulatory resources, which are considered the key predictors of interpersonal aggression. Individuals need resources and energy to address other forms of aggressive and deviant behavior. It is, therefore, essential for researchers to view abusive supervision through the lens of two concepts: First, how the depletion of individuals' value. The study investigates the role of dark personality traits on abusive supervision and employee's cynicism with an adverse effect on organizational sustainability performance. The study also examines the role of AI as a moderator that may promote organizational sustainability performance.

2 Literature Review

An extensive literature on abusive supervision has shed light on the drastic consequences of abusive supervision on employees and the organizations (Moin & Khan, 2025). The victims of abusive supervision not only retaliate against the supervisors but also show deviant behaviors at the workplace. A critical outcome of abusive supervision that negatively affects interpersonal relationships inside and outside the organization is subordinates' aggressive behaviors. Liu et al. (2025) report that the families of victims of abusive supervision experience social undermining by the abusers in their homes. Past research suggests that when subordinates perceive themselves as victims of interpersonal mistreatment, they are more likely to display aggressive behaviors at work (Marchant-Pérez et al., 2024). Abusive supervision is based on multiple determinants, including contextual and personal factors. Personality is one potential variable that influences the decision to display aggression at work (Liu et al., 2025). The study focuses on supervisors' narcissism due to its significant association with aggression in the social psychology literature. Highly narcissistic individuals perceive that they are good at most things, which creates a host of possible threats to their self-esteem. The study asserts that the dark triad personality of supervisors influences employees' reactions to their supervisors whom they perceive abusive since this behavior is seen as threat to one's self-image. Szabó et al. (2023) suggest that the supervisors with dark triads are highly susceptible to justice evaluations and engage in display of abusive behaviors towards others to enhance and preserve their self-image.

2.1 Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision is a subjective assessment of an employee's perception of a supervisor's behavior, such as undermining, belittling, or invading a subordinate's privacy. The concept of abusive supervision was first introduced by Tepper (2000) in his research article titled "Consequences of Abusive Supervision". The literature review suggests that abusive supervision has a detrimental impact on the employees, supervisors, and organizations (Liu et al., 2025). Past studies report that victims of abuse suffer from stress, helplessness, low self-esteem, emotional exhaustion, low commitment, life satisfaction, and work alienation (Liu et al., 2025).

2.2 Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of resources theory posits that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect their valuable resources, and when they feel threatened, they become aggressive and abusive. Hobfoll (2001) defined resources as the objects, personal characteristics, or energies that people value. The value of resources varies across individuals and depends on their situations and personal experiences. When individuals lose or feel threatened by the loss of their valuable resources, they are more likely to exhibit deviant and negative behaviors, such as burnout (Gümüştaş & Karataş Gümüştaş, 2025), counterproductive work behaviors, and abusive supervision. In addition, studies have reported that individuals have limited energy and cognitive resources required to maintain self-regulation mechanisms.

2.3 Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory suggests that interpersonal relationships develop through the notion of exchange. Prior studies on SET have focused on mutually beneficial relationships (Gouldner, 1960). Abusive supervision (such as ridiculing, criticizing, or giving the silent treatment) signifies a negative exchange and may promote negative reciprocity (Balogun et al., 2025). Employees expect to be treated with consideration and respect by their supervisors, and in exchange, they work harder, maintain positive attitudes, and treat others with consideration. When the employees become victims of abusive supervision, they feel less positive about their jobs and reciprocate in the same way by engaging in deviant workplace behaviors. Many subordinates fail to reciprocate negative behavior at workplace due to a higher power distance and future implications.

2.4 Dark Triad and Abusive Supervision

2.4.1 *Supervisor's Narcissism and Abusive Supervision*

Emmons (1989) referred to narcissism as “the tendency to have inflated, grandiose views of oneself, especially in comparison to others”. Researchers have remained uncertain about the concept of narcissism (Webster et al., 2025). Freud states that narcissists seek to strengthen “the positivity of the self, even at the expense of feelings of warmth and caring for others” (Lartey et al., 2024). When their inflated self-view is threatened, narcissists respond angrily and engage in abusive behaviors (Braun et al., 2024). They focus on self-admiration and fantasize about success while displaying envy, hypersensitivity, and a lack of empathy. Paulhus and Williams (2002) found that highly narcissistic individuals have positive attributes like extraversion, intelligence, openness to experience, and intelligence. Some of the prior studies have explained narcissism as hostile and aggressive tendencies (Alsadaan & Alqahtani, 2024); however, the majority of researchers are of the view that narcissists become abusive when they are provoked (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). Marchant-Pérez et al. (2024) argue that highly narcissistic individuals are unstable and have a high self-esteem, therefore, they become reactive when they feel threat to their ego and self-image. Based on social exchange theory, the narcissist supervisors reciprocate aggressively to the negative feedback of the subordinates. Narcissist supervisors view abusive supervision as the strategy to regain their self-respect and self-esteem (Gauglitz et al., 2023). Thus, it is asserted that

H1a: Supervisor's narcissism promotes abusive supervision.

2.4.2 *Supervisor's Machiavellianism and Abusive Supervision*

The relationship between Machiavellianism and abusive supervision is rooted in the interplay of manipulative personality traits and hostile leadership behaviors (Li et al., 2024). Machiavellianism, a Dark Triad trait identified by cynicism, manipulation, and self-interest, predisposes individuals to view interpersonal relationships as transactional tools for personal gain. Li et al. (2024) found that leaders high in Machiavellianism are more likely to engage in abusive supervision, defined as sustained verbal or nonverbal hostility, public criticism, or demeaning actions toward subordinates, due to their instrumental approach to power and willingness to exploit others to achieve their goals. Research

suggests this connection is reinforced by social exchange dynamics, in which Machiavellian leaders perceive subordinates' failures or perceived inadequacies as threats to their authority, prompting retaliatory abuse (Rus et al., 2025). Furthermore, their low empathy and tendency to equate personal success with organizational performance may justify the use of abusive tactics as necessary for control or efficiency. Power dynamics and situational stressors, such as job insecurity or competitive environments, amplify this behavior, as Machiavellian leaders prioritize dominance to mitigate perceived threats (Khan et al., 2023). However, the relationship is not universal; cultural contexts (such as high power-distance cultures) and organizational factors (such as weak accountability systems) moderate its intensity, while some studies note that abuse may only emerge when Machiavellianism coexists with other traits like narcissism or external pressures. Organizations seeking to mitigate such behaviors must address leadership screening, ethical training, and structural accountability to disrupt the cycle of manipulation and abuse, underscoring the need for nuanced interventions tailored to both personality and context.

H1b: Machiavellian supervisor promotes abusive supervision.

2.4.3 Supervisor's Psychopathy and Abusive Supervision

Psychopathy, characterized by traits such as superficial charm, lack of empathy, and manipulative behavior, has been increasingly studied in organizational contexts, particularly its interplay with abusive supervision. Recent research highlights that individuals with psychopathic tendencies in leadership roles often exhibit abusive supervision (Carter et al., 2024), leveraging their emotional detachment and dominance to engage in exploitative or demeaning behaviors, which exacerbates workplace toxicity and deviance. De Bruin and Finkelstein (2023) found that employees with psychopathic traits under abusive supervision displayed high negative socioemotional behaviors, stifling creativity and engagement, particularly in high-stress work environments. Psychopathy in organizations has been linked to increased turnover intentions and reduced job satisfaction, as abusive supervision amplifies employees' sense of injustice and emotional exhaustion (Fernandes et al., 2024). Prior studies report that psychopathic leaders' impulsivity and insensitivity are positively associated with aggression and abusive supervision (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023), where abusive tactics are strategically used to

maintain control, further entrenching a culture of fear and compliance. Therefore, it is proposed that

H1c: Supervisor's psychopathy promotes abusive supervision.

2.5 Abusive Supervision and Employee Cynicism

When the employees are abused, they have a negative perception of their supervisors and organizations. These negative employees' perceptions of their supervisors develop a cynical workplace environment. Sun et al. (2022) argue that employees spread rumors and negativity regarding their supervisors and organizations and display counterproductive work behaviors. Ahmed et al. (2024) state that victims of abusive supervision have a low level of job-related satisfaction and life satisfaction, hence making the employees cynical at the workplace. When employees do not get sufficient resources from their abusive supervisors due to their threats, intimidation, and anger, they lose their trust and efforts in the organization and stop utilizing their valuable resources (Supatni & Sunaryo, 2024).

H2: Abusive supervision positively influences employee cynicism.

2.6 Abusive Supervision and Tendency to Gossip

Nevo et al. (1993) referred to gossip as "verbal or written communication that regards personal matters of a third party". Studies have reported a range of adverse consequences of workplace gossip, and it is considered an undesirable behavior (Zhong et al., 2025). Ding et al. (2024) argue that gossip results in antisocial behaviors and group formation, leading to workplace conflicts. Based on the theory of retaliation, it can be asserted that when an employee is abused, his/her tendency to retaliate increases. As subordinates know that, due to high power distance, they may not engage in direct retaliation, they respond to abusive supervision by spreading gossip about the supervisors to destroy their image (Wei et al., 2023). Prior studies suggest that employees who fail to retaliate engage in gossip (Gao et al., 2024). Similarly, Bhattacharjee and Sarkar (2024) assert that when the abused lack the power and authority to respond to their supervisors, they spread negative word of mouth about the abusive supervisor (Fernandes et al., 2024). Thus, it is argued that

H3: Abusive supervision positively promotes the tendency to gossip.

2.7 Employee Cynicism and Organizational Sustainable Performance

Employee cynicism, defined as a negative attitude toward organizational practices, leadership, and goals, can significantly affect sustainable performance by diminishing

employee engagement, motivation, and productivity (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998). When employees harbor cynical views, they are less likely to contribute to long-term organizational success, as their trust in leadership and commitment to organizational objectives wane (Buchanan, 2005). This disconnection can lead to reduced job satisfaction, higher turnover, and lower innovation, all of which negatively impact an organization's ability to achieve sustained growth and performance (O'Neill & Hastings, 2011). Therefore, organizations must address the underlying causes of cynicism, such as poor communication, inconsistent leadership, and perceived unethical practices, to foster a positive, trust-based work environment that supports sustainable performance (Kiefer, 2005). Therefore, it can be asserted that

H4: Employee cynicism negatively influences organizational sustainable performance.

2.8 Tendency to Gossip and Organizational Sustainable Performance

The tendency to gossip in the workplace can negatively influence sustainable performance by fostering a toxic organizational culture, reducing trust, and escalating interpersonal conflicts. While gossip may initially seem like a social bonding activity, research indicates that it often leads to the spread of misinformation, divisiveness, and a lack of cooperation among employees (Yao et al., 2020). Such behavior undermines morale, decreases engagement, and distracts from organizational goals, ultimately impairing productivity and long-term performance (Greenslade-Yeats et al., 2024). Moreover, frequent gossip can erode trust in leadership, diminish employee commitment, and increase turnover, all of which hinder the organization's ability to achieve sustained success. To promote sustainable performance, organizations must address gossip through clear communication, conflict-resolution strategies, and a focus on building a positive, collaborative culture aligned with the organization's values and objectives (Zou et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that

H5: Tendency to gossip adversely influences organizational sustainable performance.

2.9 Moderating Role of AI

The moderating role of artificial intelligence (AI) in organizational processes has gained significant attention, particularly in its potential to influence outcomes such as employee performance, decision-making, and workplace dynamics. AI technologies can serve as powerful tools to enhance efficiency, reduce bias, and provide data-driven insights that improve decision-making and productivity (Gazi et al., 2024). However, AI's impact

is not uniform; it often depends on how it is integrated into existing workflows and the level of trust employees place in the technology (Khan, 2025). For example, AI can moderate the relationship between leadership behaviors and employee satisfaction by automating routine tasks, thereby allowing managers to focus on more strategic interactions (Chin et al., 2024). In this sense, AI not only influences organizational performance directly but can also shape interpersonal dynamics, communication, and trust in ways that either enhance or diminish overall sustainable performance. Therefore, it is hypothesized that

H6: AI moderates the association between employee cynicism and organizational sustainable performance.

H7: AI moderates the association between the tendency to gossip and organizational sustainable performance.

2.10 Abusive Supervision as a Mediator

2.10.1 Dark Triad Leadership Traits, Abusive Supervision, and Employee Cynicism

The dark triad traits of supervisors normalize abusive supervision at the workplace by asserting dominance, manipulating outcomes, or satisfying impulsive urges (Bingül & Göncü-Köse, 2024). Abusive supervision acts as the mechanism through which Dark Triad traits of supervisors promote employee cynicism (Dionigi et al., 2022). COR model asserts that abusive behaviors deplete employees' psychological resources. Employees subjected to constant criticism or humiliation enter a state of resource scarcity, triggering a defensive survival mode. To conserve their remaining resources, they disengage emotionally and adopt cynical attitudes as a shield against further exploitation (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). Simultaneously, Social Learning Theory explains how employees internalize and mimic the toxic behaviors they observe. Abusive supervision models self-serving, exploitative conduct, teaching employees that cynicism is a rational response to an unethical environment. Over time, employees learn to distrust organizational goals and leadership sincerity, adopting a worldview where self-preservation outweighs loyalty (Supatni & Sunaryo, 2024). This is reinforced when they witness abusive leaders being rewarded for their behavior (e.g., promotions for Machiavellian manipulation), further normalizing cynicism as a survival tactic. The COR model posits that chronic resource loss pushes employees to view the workplace as inherently hostile. Cynicism emerges as a

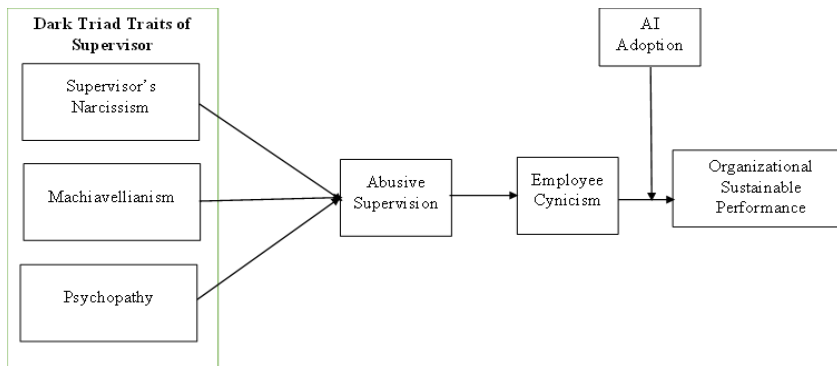
coping strategy to avoid further depletion. Meanwhile, SLT highlights how cynicism becomes a learned cultural norm. Employees replicate their supervisors' manipulative or distrustful behaviors, perpetuating a cycle where cynicism spreads across teams, undermining collaboration and morale (Abugre & Acquaaah, 2022).

H8a: Abusive supervision mediates the relationship between narcissistic supervisor and employee cynicism.

H8b: Abusive supervision mediates the relationship between a psychopathic supervisor and employee cynicism.

H8c: Abusive supervision mediates the relationship between a Machiavellian supervisor and employee cynicism.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework



3 Research Methodology

The preceding chapters have raised certain questions about the antecedents and consequences of abusive supervision. To address these questions, a new model based on theoretical grounding was developed and discussed in the literature review section. This section explores the study's research methodology.

3.1 Population and sampling

The study's target population was restricted to SMEs in Karachi. Specifically, the study targets four industrial estates: federal B Area, North Karachi, Korangi, and Site Area. According to the SME association, there are 2,414 members in these areas. Hair et al. (2012) suggest that in multivariate analysis, the minimum sample size can be based on five to twenty samples for each indicator variable. The data are collected from 450 respondents

selected using a nonprobability convenience sampling technique, which exceeds the minimum requirement suggested by Hair et al. (2012).

3.2 Scale and Measures

The measurement items in this study are taken from previously validated constructs (Straub, 1989). A key benefit of using pre-existing measures, as highlighted by Bell and Bryman (2007), is that their reliability and validity have already been assessed. This provides researchers with prior knowledge of the measures' psychometric properties. The questionnaire for this dissertation was adapted from earlier established scales and measures. It has two parts. Part I is on demographics and has seven items, all on a nominal scale. The second part of the questionnaire, related to the main study, has seven constructs. This part of the questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The study adopts the Likert scale (five points) developed by Renis Likert (Likert, 1932). The study employed the well-accepted 12-item Dirty Dozen scale to examine narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Volmer et al., 2016).

4 Results

4.1 Respondent Profile

The demographic profile shows that most participants were males (76%), whereas females accounted for 24% of the sample. Regarding marital status, about two-thirds of respondents (65%) were married, while 35% were single. The age distribution indicates that 32% of the respondents were between 20 and 30 years, 35% were in the 31-40 years age group, 28% were aged 41-50, and only 5% were in the 51-60 years age group. Regarding education, 5% of the participants completed matriculation, 35% had intermediate qualifications, 47% had a bachelor's degree, and 13% had a master's degree.

4.2 Factor Loadings

Based on the factor loading results presented in Table 1, all the indicator variables loadings exceed the minimum threshold of 0.70, fulfilling Hair et al.'s criterion for acceptable item reliability.

Table 1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

	AI	AS	EC	OSP	SM	SN	SP
AI1	0.728						
AI2	0.863						
AI3	0.905						
AI4	0.836						
AI5	0.841						
AI6	0.737						
AS1		0.755					
AS2		0.747					
AS3		0.86					
AS4		0.843					
AS5		0.823					
AS6		0.759					
EC1			0.785				
EC2			0.815				
EC3			0.819				
EC4			0.808				
EC5			0.746				
EC6			0.756				
EC7			0.77				
EC8			0.749				
OSP1				0.822			
OSP2				0.863			
OSP3				0.814			
OSP4				0.879			
OSP5				0.725			
OSP6				0.839			
SM1					0.726		
SM2					0.749		
SM3					0.893		
SM4					0.842		
SN1						0.726	
SN2						0.802	
SN3						0.834	
SN4						0.86	
SP1							0.819
SP2							0.749
SP3							0.842
SP4							0.794

4.3 Reliability and Convergent Validity

The results for reliability and convergent validity of the constructs are presented in Table 2. Based on the findings, all constructs meet the convergent validity and reliability criteria outlined by Hair et al. (2014). Convergent validity is confirmed, as the AVE values for the constructs exceed the 0.50 threshold, and the Composite Reliability (CR) values also exceed the recommended 0.70 benchmark. Similarly, the Cronbach's Alpha values exceed 0.70 for all the factors.

Table 2 Reliability and Convergent Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
AI Adoption	0.901	0.925	0.673
Abusive Supervision	0.886	0.914	0.639
Employee cynicism	0.909	0.926	0.611
Org. Sust. Performance	0.906	0.927	0.681
Supervisor's Machiavellianism	0.909	0.926	0.643
Supervisor's Narcissism	0.903	0.924	0.634
Supervisor's Psychopathy	0.89	0.913	0.637

2.1. Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity was ascertained via Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criteria, indicating that the square roots of the AVEs for all constructs are greater than the correlations among them, thus fulfilling the criteria.

Table 3 Discriminant Validity

Constructs	AI	AS	EC	OSP	SM	SN	SP
AI Adoption	0.861						
Abusive Supervision	0.835	0.899					
Employee cynicism	0.604	0.653	0.782				
Org. Sust. Performance	0.804	0.856	0.666	0.885			
Sup. Machiavellianism	0.859	0.88	0.64	0.835	0.902		
Sup. Narcissism	0.856	0.862	0.637	0.872	0.816	0.996	
Sup. Psychopathy	0.82	0.819	0.584	0.879	0.864	0.838	0.898

4.4 Coefficient of Determination

The results presented in Table 4 suggest that the explanatory power of Abusive supervision, employee cynicism, and organizational sustainability performance. The results indicate that Abusive Supervision demonstrates a high level of predictability, with an R² of 0.929, signifying that 92.9% of its variance is explained by the dark triad traits of supervisors in the model. Similarly, the organizational sustainability performance also demonstrates a high level of predictability (70.8%) for employee cynicism.

Table 4 Coefficient of Determination

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Abusive Supervision	0.929	0.929
Employee cynicism	0.426	0.424
Org. Sustainability Performance	0.712	0.708

2.2.Hypotheses Results

In this study, five direct hypotheses, five indirect hypotheses, and three multi-mediating relationships were proposed. The results are presented in Table 5. Measurement and structural models are presented in Figure 2 and Figure 3, respectively.

Table 5 Hypotheses Testing

Paths	Beta	T-Stats	P-Val
Direct Relationships			
1a: Sup. Narcissism -> Abusive Supervision	1.034	18.332	0
1b: Sup. Machiave. -> Abusive Supervision	-0.289	2.627	0.004
1c: Sup. Psychopathy -> Abusive Supervision	0.231	3.091	0.001
2: Abusive Supervision -> Employee cynicism	0.653	15.46	0
3: Emp Cyn. -> OSP	0.285	5.742	0
Indirect Relationships			
4a: Sup. Narcissism -> Abusive Sup -> Emp Cyn.	0.675	12.788	0
4b: Sup. Machiave -> Abusive Sup -> Emp Cyn.	-0.189	2.664	0.004
4c: Sup. Psychopathy -> Abusive Sup -> Emp Cyn	0.151	3.117	0.001
5: Abusive Sup -> Emp Cyn.-> OSP	0.186	4.919	0
6: AI Adop. x Emp Cyn. -> OSP	-0.103	3.915	0
Multi-mediating Relationships			
7a: Sup. Machiave -> Abusive Sup -> Emp Cyn. -> OSP	-0.054	2.412	0.008
7b: Sup. Psychopathy -> Abusive Sup -> Emp Cyn. -> OSP	0.043	2.801	0.003
7c: Sup. Narcissism -> Abusive Sup -> Emp Cyn -> OSP	0.192	4.805	0

The results reveal that supervisor narcissism exerts a positive influence on abusive supervision ($\beta=1.034$, $p<0.001$), similarly, supervisor's psychopathy also has a positive effect on abusive supervision ($\beta=0.231$, $p=0.001$). The findings demonstrate that the supervisor's Machiavellianism negatively affects abusive supervision ($\beta = -0.289$, $p = 0.004$), suggesting a counterintuitive behavioral mechanism. The results demonstrate that Abusive supervision promotes employee cynicism ($\beta = 0.653$, $p < 0.001$), which subsequently reduces organizational sustainability performance (OSP; $\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.001$). The mediating results indicate that employee cynicism mediates the effects of all

three dark triad traits on OSP. While investigating the moderating role of AI adoption, it was found that AI adoption attenuates the effect of employee cynicism on OSP ($\beta = -0.103$, $p < 0.001$).

Figure 2 Measurement Model

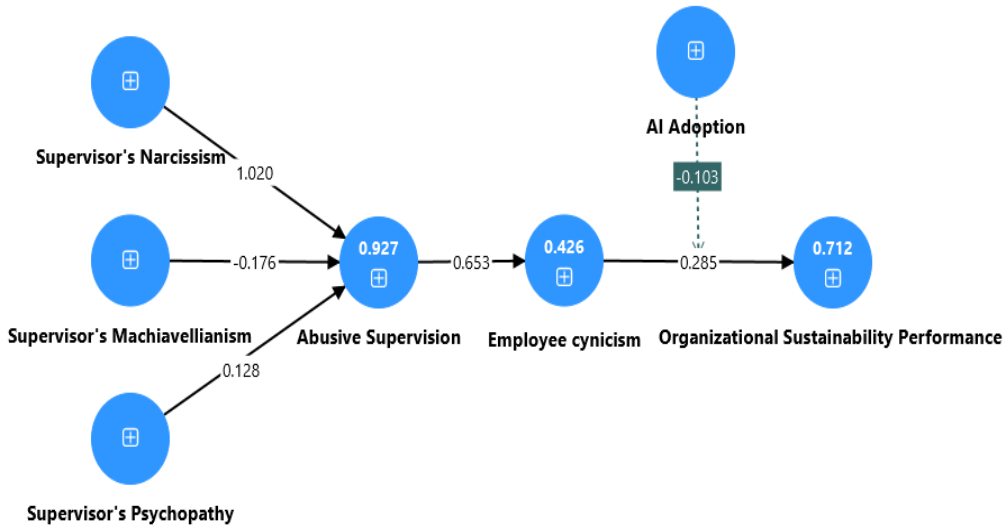
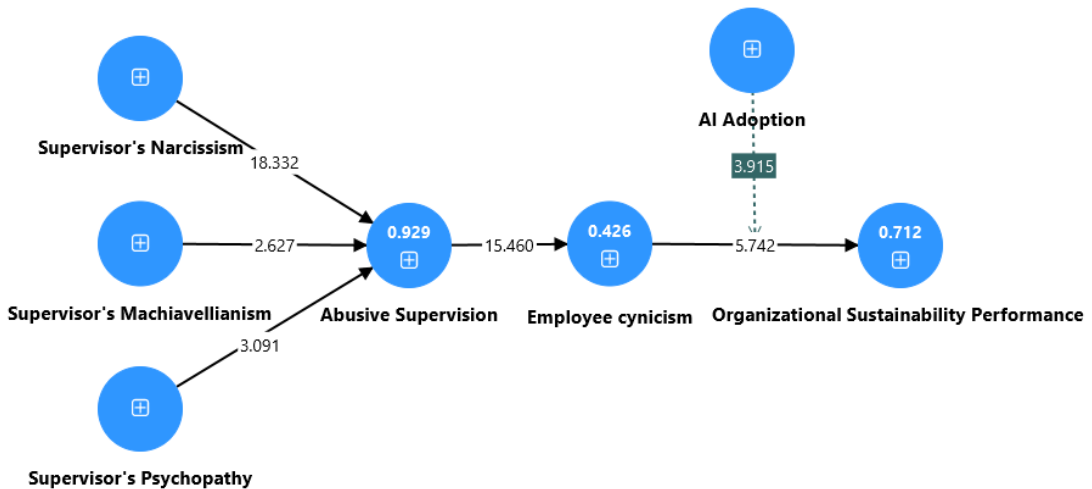


Figure 3 Structural Model



4.5 Discussion

Hypothesis 1 was on the association between dark triad traits and abusive supervision. The significantly positive effects of supervisor narcissism and psychopathy on abusive supervision align with the Dark Triad literature (Alsadaan & Alqahtani, 2024). Hierarchical power structures and limited formal oversight in SMEs of Pakistan allow narcissistic supervisors to exploit authority unchecked, leveraging their supervisors to abuse their subordinates. Similarly, the supervisors' Psychopathic traits thrive in environments where the HR policies are weak, and supervisors may scapegoat employees for operational failures (Khan et al., 2023). The results of this study show a negative association between a supervisor's Machiavellianism, contradicting prior studies. This can be due to strong kinship networks and resource constraints. Machiavellian supervisors are manipulative and therefore avoid engaging in direct abuse to preserve long-term control. They exercise restraint and subtle manipulation by withholding promotions and strategically favoring some over others, maintaining productivity without provoking visible conflict. The results of hypothesis 2 indicate that abusive supervision promotes employee cynicism in the SMEs of Pakistan. The result is consistent with the literature suggesting that in Pakistani SMEs, hierarchical structures are rigid and formal grievance mechanisms are absent, thus eroding trust in leadership. When supervisors abuse their subordinates, subordinates avoid engaging in direct retaliation (Gümüştas & Karataş Gümüştas, 2025) due to resource-scarce job markets with limited alternatives; therefore, they consider this mistreatment a systemic betrayal characterized by disbelief in managerial sincerity.

Hypothesis 3 was on the association between employee cynicism and OSP. The finding suggests that employee cynicism is adversely associated with OSP. The results are aligned with prior literature (Gauglitz et al., 2023). In the resource-constrained settings of Pakistani SMEs, employees' initiatives are essential for grassroots sustainability initiatives. When employees are highly cynical and don't trust management decisions, the sustainability performance of SMEs declines. Prior studies report that employee cynicism redirects focus from long-term sustainability to short-term survival tactics. Hypotheses 4a, 4b, and 4c examined the mediating role of abusive supervision in dark triad leadership traits and employee cynicism. The results show that the hypotheses were accepted and that the findings align with prior literature. The findings suggest that abusive supervision mediates supervisors' narcissism and employee cynicism. In Pakistan's family-owned SMEs, the narcissistic supervisors weaponize their authority via workplace abuse and public shaming. Subordinates trapped in limited mobility job markets perceive this mistreatment as a systemic betrayal, which promotes employee cynicism.

Furthermore, the results illustrate that, as Machiavellian supervisors are manipulative, they tend to reduce abusive behaviors to avoid disrupting kinship-based workflows and collective accountability. The study's findings also reveal that abusive supervision mediates the supervisor's psychopathy and employee cynicism. Hypothesis 5 illustrated the mediating role of employee cynicism in the abusive supervision-OSP relationship. The positive mediation confirms that abusive supervision erodes organizational sustainability performance (OSP) through employee cynicism, exposing operational vulnerability in Pakistan's SMEs. Cynical subordinates withdraw discretionary effort by ignoring waste-reduction practices, bypassing ethical protocols, and resisting energy-saving measures, undermining environmental and social governance. Hypothesis 6 proposed that AI Adoption moderates the relationship between employee cynicism and organizational sustainability performance. This hypothesis was accepted. The negative moderation of AI Adoption on the relationship between employee cynicism and organizational sustainability performance highlights a critical challenge for Pakistani SMEs. This suggests that when employees harbor cynicism, it reduces organizational sustainability performance. However, AI adoption may reduce the negative effect of this relationship.

Hypotheses 7a, 7b, and 7c demonstrated a multi-mediating role for abusive supervision and employee cynicism in the dark triad traits of supervisors and OSP. The negative serial mediation of abusive supervision and employee cynicism on supervisor Machiavellianism to reduce Organizational Sustainability Performance (OSP) underscores a systemic vulnerability in Pakistani SMEs. Supervisors high in Machiavellianism are more likely to engage in abusive behaviors. This abuse promotes employee cynicism, manifesting as distrust in leadership about organizational integrity. In Pakistan's SME context, where formal HR safeguards are often limited, this may erode employees' collective commitment to sustainability goals. Conversely, the positive serial mediation effect of supervisor psychopathy on OSP reveals that Psychopathic supervisors exhibit impulsivity and emotional coldness (Rus et al., 2025) that intensify abusive behaviors, triggering employee cynicism. High cynicism may reduce OSP and employee distrust of management decisions and claims regarding OSP. Similarly, the results also indicate that abusive supervision and employee cynicism mediate supervisors' narcissism and OSP relationship. Narcissistic leaders in Pakistani SMEs deploy abuse to assert dominance and suppress dissent. This may intensify employee cynicism as employees resent leaders' self-centered agendas, reducing OSP.

5 Conclusion

Based on COR and SET theory, a model was developed to study the influence of dark triad leadership on OSP via abusive supervision and employee cynicism, and the role of AI adoption in minimizing the adverse effects of cynicism on OSP. The study examined five direct, five indirect, and three multi-mediating relations. This study reveals a complex and critical path through which Dark Triad traits of supervisors (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) affect Organizational Sustainability Performance (OSP) in Pakistani SMEs, with abusive supervision and employee cynicism mediating the relationship. The findings validate that narcissistic and psychopathic supervisors drive abusive behaviors leading to employee cynicism and subsequently erode OSP, highlighting a pervasive threat to long-term environmental, social, and economic viability in resource-constrained settings of SMEs of Pakistan. This research also reveals the predicament of SMEs in Pakistan, where Dark Triad leadership fosters workplace abuse, resulting in high levels of cynicism and low levels of employee engagement. In developing economies such as Pakistan, where SMEs are the engine of growth and employment, it is not merely an organizational problem; rather, it is a national development challenge. The strategic use of AI as a tool for governance and transparency can disrupt this toxic cycle. Based on prior studies, it can be stated that the future survival and competitiveness of Pakistani SMEs will depend not only on financial capital but also on developing psychologically safe, ethical leadership that is also resourceful and capable of shepherding their organizations toward sustainability.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes an important contribution to destructive leadership theory by empirically supporting serial mediation processes in a poorly studied context of dark triad and OSP. It extends COR theory and SET by integrating the moderating role of AI adoption, demonstrating AI's capacity to break the cycle of cynicism and its negative consequences for sustainability.

5.2 Practical Implications

For Pakistani SMEs, the findings suggest implementing a leadership Screening mechanism that uses psychometric assessments to identify Dark Triad traits during promotions. Similarly, deploying transparent AI tools (such as unbiased performance trackers) to demonstrate fairness and counter cynicism may help increase employee

engagement in OSP activities. The results also suggest that there must be accountability for abusive supervision in the workplace through the establishment of anonymous reporting channels. The results suggest that dark triad personalities have higher tendencies to engage in adverse behaviors in the workplace, thus promoting counterproductive behaviors. Training programs specifically designed to address issues related to dark personalities may help minimize adverse consequences and promote growth and organizational sustainability. Moreover, an AI-based system is less likely to be prone to favoritism or bias and may enhance the organization's sustainability despite high cynicism.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several methodological and conceptual constraints are recognized in this study. The study has used a cross-sectional design to evaluate the role of Dark Triad leadership and its consequences; longitudinal data is needed to confirm its role in ensuring minimum sustainability performance over time. Furthermore, the use of self-reported surveys can introduce common-method bias, especially for constructs such as abusive supervision and cynicism. Finally, the model does not include contextual moderators, such as organizational ethics climate and the presence of a union, which might change these dynamics in the volatile SME ecosystem in Pakistan.

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