

## Perceived Dark Personality of Leaders and Its Impact on the Psychological Capital of the Employees

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### ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a growing interest in research exploring positive organisational outcomes alongside dark personality traits in the workplace and their mutual impact. This research studies the impact of the dark personality of a leader on positive psychological capital through the leader-member exchange quality using mediation analysis. A total of 172 questionnaires are collected from employees of various organisations. They rated their leader's dark personality (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy), own psychological capital, and the quality of exchanges between them and their leaders. As hypothesised the Leader-Member Exchange mediated the relationship between the supervisor's dark triad personality traits and employees' positive psychological capital. This study helps in understanding the effect of leadership on the psychological states of employees and the path via which these effects are propagated. These findings were further discussed in the light of implications to the organisations, directions for future research and limitations.

**Keywords:** *Dark triad, personality, LMX, PsyCap, Mediation, leadership*

The growth and success of any organisation are closely linked to the performance of its employees, which is influenced by the workplace environment. One important factor in this environment is leadership, which plays a significant role in shaping organisation outcomes and employees' attitudes, behaviours, performance, and psychological states. Leadership has been seen as a positive force leading to good organisational outcomes. A leader's traits and leadership style directly affect the psychological states of the employees. The success or failure of an organisation largely hinges on the critical element of leadership. While leadership has been defined in various ways depending on the context, it can generally be described as the ability to influence a group to achieve common goals. Leadership has been extensively studied in organisational settings, with much of the focus on "good" leadership or the traits that make an effective leader. However, there is also a less explored but equally important side—the "dark" or "bad" side of leadership. This aspect involves destructive and toxic leadership behaviours that can have harmful effects on both followers and the organisation as a whole. Recently,

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there has been a growing body of research on dark personality traits in the workplace and their impact on positive organisational outcomes.

Dark Triad (DT) personality traits is most researched construct dark personality construct, which consist of Subclinical narcissism, subclinical psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These traits are toxic, offensive, and maladaptive. Psychopathy trait is portrayed as impulsivity and thrill-seeking behaviour combined with low empathy, guilt, and concern for others. People high in Machiavellianism display deceptive behaviours in social interactions, they are self-interested, cynical, exploitative, and manipulative. Narcissism describes an individual tendency to present themselves in an overly positive manner, with interpersonal control and dominance tendencies, and a strong sense of entitlement. The dark side of leadership causes numerous and severe negative effects on followers' physical, emotional, and psychological well-being; however, the context serves as an important determinant of whether dark personality traits will play a positive or negative outcome (Furnham et al., 2013). Even though these traits are socially undesirable and offensive, individuals who display them still operate within the normal spectrum of human behaviour. They are capable of enduring and succeeding in society despite these negative characteristics (Paulhus, 2014).

Dark personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy) negatively impact workplace performance, behaviour, well-being, and job attitudes. They are linked to higher stress, burnout, turnover intentions, and knowledge-hiding (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Pan et al., 2018; Richardson & Boag, 2016). While these traits can hinder collaboration, they can also lead to success in leadership and negotiation by prioritizing personal gain over relationships. The dark triad traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—can have both positive and negative effects in leadership roles. While these traits help individuals rise to leadership positions through charisma, strategic thinking, and fearlessness, they also lead to detrimental behaviours, including abusive supervision, aggression, and counterproductive work behaviours. Narcissism may enhance career success but negatively impact job satisfaction and organizational outcomes. Psychopathy correlates with emotional exhaustion, while Machiavellianism is linked to career dissatisfaction and unethical behaviours. Additionally, these traits can lead to authoritarian leadership styles, increased turnover intention, and decreased team innovation. The cascading effects of dark triad traits from leaders to teams can harm organisational performance (Fodor et al., 2021; Kiazad et al., 2010; Mathieu & Babiak, 2016).

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) has been defined as the “*quality of the dyadic relationship between a leader and their follower; and is characterised by trust, respect, and obligation towards one other*” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The core concept of LMX lies in the quality of social exchanges, which range from high-quality to low-quality interactions. High-quality exchanges are characterized by mutual trust, loyalty, commitment, respect, support, and reciprocity. In contrast, low-quality exchanges are more transactional, marked by limited trust, formal and task-focused interactions, and a lack of obligation (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

High Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) is linked to positive employee behaviours and attitudes. It enhances citizenship behaviours, task performance, work engagement, and organizational commitment. Employees with high LMX tend to have lower counterproductive work behaviours and turnover intentions. LMX also improves role clarity,

job satisfaction, and perceptions of justice (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Ilies et al., 2007).

Psychological capital refers to a “*positive mental state in the growth and development of individuals, which specifically manifests as Efficacy (confidence in the ability to achieve a goal), Optimism (positive attribution about the future), Hope (high goal-directed determination), and Resilience (quality of sustaining and bouncing back during adversity)*” (Luthans et al., 2004). It has been conceptualized as a state-like second-order construct of unique, measurable, interconnected, and renewable resources. It can be developed and strengthened through microintervention in short sessions (Luthans et al., 2006). Even though each of the four psychological resources of PsyCap has its unique characteristics and benefits, it is greater than the sum of its parts.

Positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap) has been shown to enhance both individual and organizational outcomes. It improves job satisfaction, performance, employee retention, and organizational commitment while reducing undesirable behaviours like workplace deviance and turnover intentions. PsyCap also boosts employee well-being, work engagement, and counters negative outcomes such as stress and anxiety. Organisations are encouraged to foster PsyCap to obtain a competitive edge (Avey, 2014; Wu & Nguyen, 2019).

### **SDT and LMX**

Fodor and colleagues (2021), has found a negative association between the supervisor’s dark triad traits and the quality of LMX. Leaders with high dark traits create low-quality leader-member exchanges. Unlike high LMX, which is based on trust and respect, these leaders engage in manipulation, control, and exploitation. Machiavellian leaders prefer easily manipulated followers, psychopathic leaders lack empathy, and narcissistic leaders seek dominance. These behaviours lead to distrust, deception, and sometimes retaliation by employees, resulting in poor leader-member relationships.

### **LMX and PsyCap**

The quality of leader-member exchange ranges from low to high, based on trust, respect, and obligation. High-quality exchanges provide support, enhance self-efficacy, foster hope, and promote optimism. These exchanges, characterized by participation, recognition, and a positive environment, contribute to building and strengthening positive psychological capital in the workplace. These theoretical expectations that LMX is positively associated with the Psychological Capital (PsyCap) of employees have been supported by many empirical studies (Upadhyay & Kumar, 2020; Wang et al., 2018).

### **SDT and PsyCap**

Leadership has been a predictor of various employee and organisational outcomes, which itself is influenced by the traits of the leader. Dark traits of the leader manifest in the negative leadership styles and behaviours at the workplace. It can be argued that supervisors with dark traits maintain shallow, unempathetic relationships, disregard, and distrust followers, prioritise their own interests at others' expense, and use deceit and manipulation to achieve goals, engaging in exploitative behaviours without remorse. This environment undermines the development of positive psychological capital. Both the Dark Triad and positive organizational behaviour have been extensively studied over the past decade. However, research connecting SDT with Psychological Capital has been limited, representing a significant gap in the literature.

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Characterising with their traits leaders engage in relevant leadership behaviours and styles with their followers. As explained LMX is an important antecedent of both the positive psychological capital and outcome of SDT. Therefore, LMX is proposed as a potential mediator between SDT and employee psychological capital. The proposed LMX have been used in various to explain links between a leader's traits and employees' and organisational outcomes. Like, LMX has been used as a mediator to explain the influence of Supervisors' Dark Triad personality traits on team performance and innovation (Fodor et al., 2021).

### *Hypotheses*

The following hypotheses are being formulated according to our objectives and the proposed model for the current research investigation:

- **H1:** Supervisor's Dark Triad personality traits negatively influence the Leader-Member Exchange at the workplace.
- **H2:** Leader-Member Exchange positively influences employees' Psychological Capital at the workplace.
- **H3:** The influence of the Supervisor's Dark Triad (SDT) personality traits on employees' Psychological Capital is mediated by Leader-Member Exchange.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Participants and Procedure*

The participants for this study were employees from government and private organisations including PSUs, banks, and the IT industry, who were willing to participate in this study and were sampled using purposive sampling. The organisations were based in Delhi and across cities in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Respondents who fit the eligibility criteria were asked to fill out the questionnaires. Participants required about eight to ten minutes to fill out the questionnaire. Later they were thanked for their valuable contribution to the research as participants.

The study was conducted in both offline and online modes in June 2024. Finally, a total of 187 completed questionnaires were obtained out of which eight were excluded for not being able to meet eligibility criteria. Seven data were removed due to the presence of outliers and missing data. Data from 172 participants (92- Google Forms and 80- Paper Forms) were retained for final analysis.

### *Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria*

The data was collected from employees who were team members or below leadership positions in their organisations. The respondent must have spent at least a year working under their supervisor. The minimum education qualification of a Bachelor's degree was set for the participants in the study. Also, data collected from employees aged 21 years and above were only taken into consideration for data analysis. Employees working from home were excluded in this study, due to significant reduced face to face interaction. Apart from this, there were no other inclusion-exclusion criteria for being eligible for this research.

### *Measures*

The following standardised and validated measures were used to assess the variables in this research study.

### Short Dark Triad

Supervisor's Dark Triad (SDT) personality traits were rated by participants using a 27-item Short Dark Triad scale developed by Jones and Paulhus (2014). The frame of reference of each item of this 5-point Likert scale (1- *Disagree Strongly* to 5- *Agree Strongly*) was changed to obtain the leader's/supervisor's Dark Triad rating as assessed by their subordinates. This approach has been employed by many studies in prior research (Lyons et al., 2019; Volmer et al., 2016). Exemplary items were "My supervisor hates being the centre of attention (Narcissism)," *My supervisor believes it is not wise to tell your secrets (Machiavellianism)* and "My supervisor likes to get revenge on authorities (Psychopathy)." For each sub-dimensional trait, nine items and five were reverse scored. Total scores ranged between 27 to 135. Cronbach Alpha as a measure of internal consistency was found to be 0.905.

### Leader-Member Exchange

The Leader-Member Exchange scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) contains 7 items. Each item was assessed on a 5-point Likert scale (1- *Not a bit* to 5- *a great deal*) and the anchors for the items varied depending on the item content. A sample item is "How well does your leader understand your job problems and needs?" Cronbach Alpha as a measure of internal consistency for this scale was found to be 0.887.

### Psychological Capital

Psychological capital was measured using the Psychological Capital Questionnaire developed by Luthans et al., (2007). It is a 24-item 6-point rating scale to assess Hope, Efficacy, Resilience and Optimism, where 1 means "Strongly Disagree" and 6 means "Strongly Agree". The scale includes items like "I feel confident presenting information to a group of colleagues", "If something can go wrong for me work-wise, it will" etc. Cronbach Alpha was found to be 0.881.

### Statistical Analysis

All data analyses were performed using IBM SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics, including the Mean and Standard Deviation, were used to summarize the data's central tendency, variability, and distribution. Descriptive statistics also helped compute the means and standard deviations of demographic groups to understand score distributions. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was employed to examine the strength of relationships between variables. Mediation analyses were conducted using PROCESS MACRO version 4.2 in SPSS (Hayes, 2013). A significance level of 0.05 was set for all analyses, and the observed statistical power, considering significance level  $\alpha$ , sample size, and effect size, was also reported.

## RESULT

The results after scoring and analysing the data are presented in the following three sections comprising of descriptive, correlational and mediation analysis.

### Descriptive Analysis

This section presents the demographic details of the final sample of 172 participants. Demographic details collected included employees' gender, supervisor's gender, age, educational qualifications, years worked with the supervisor, and occupational sector (private or government). This information is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Demographic details of the sample**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender of Employee</b>		
Male	105	61.0
Female	167	39.0
<b>Gender of Supervisor</b>		
Male	126	73.3
Female	46	26.7
<b>Employee- Supervisor Gender Combination</b>		
Male-Male	86	50.0
Male-Female	19	11.0
Female-Male	40	23.3
Female-Female	27	15.7
<b>Sector</b>		
Private	108	34.7
Government	203	65.3
<b>Age</b>		
21-30 Years	91	52.9
31-40 Years	49	28.5
Above 40 Years	32	18.6
<b>Education</b>		
Bachelor's	83	48.3
Master's	75	43.6
Doctorate	14	8.1
<b>Years with Supervisor</b>		
1-5 Years	124	72.1
6-10 Years	30	17.4
Above 10 Years	18	10.5

**Correlation Analysis**

The correlations using Pearson correlation are presented in Table 2. Without formulating any hypotheses related to correlation, the analysis provided insights into how the variables studied changed in relation to one another. All the correlations between all the combinations of variables were significant at a .05 significance level. Supervisor's Dark Triad (SDT) negatively correlated with LMX ( $r = -0.423, p < .05$ ) with medium strength of association. It also has a negative correlation with a small effect size with the outcome variable Psychological Capital of employees ( $r = -0.242, p < .05$ ). LMX has a positive correlation with Psychological Capital ( $r = 0.424, p < .05$ ).

**Table 2 Coefficient of Correlation (Pearson's r) among all variables**

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>SDT</b>	80.87	16.655	1		
<b>LMX</b>	23.89	5.785	<b>-.423</b>	1	
<b>PsyCap</b>	105.19	15.480	<b>-.242</b>	<b>.424</b>	1

**Mediation Analysis**

This section deals with the impact of one variable on another variable along with the mediation effect of the third variable. Specifically, the Supervisor Dark Triad (SDT) personality trait is a criterion variable, LMX acts as a mediating variable and Psychological

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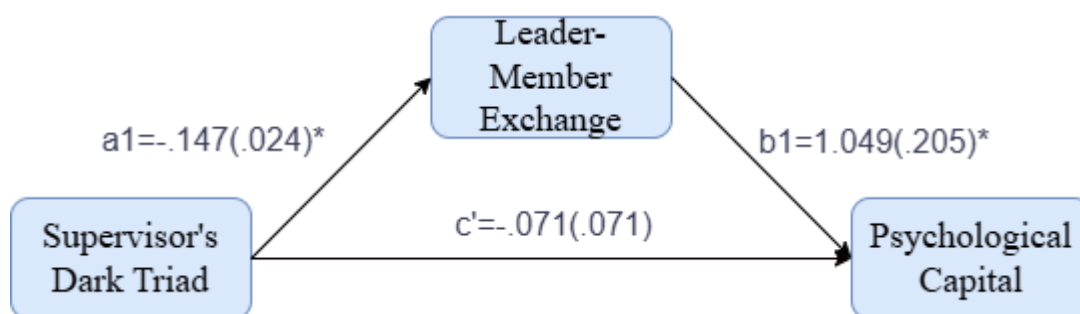
Capital is the predicted variable. The gender of the follower and supervisor, age of the employee, occupation sector and years spent working with the supervisor have been used as control variables in the analysis. All the assumptions required for proceeding with mediation analysis were fulfilled and the obtained results with the standardised and unstandardised coefficients for regression for all the paths between the predictor and outcome variables after the analysis are provided in Table 3.

Hypothesis 1 is supported which predicts a direct and negative effect of Supervisor Dark Triad personality on the Leader-Member Exchange Quality of employees, as the standardised regression coefficient is significant ( $\beta = -0.423$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ). Also, the Leader-Member Exchange Quality of employees was significantly related to their Psychological Capital ( $\beta = .392$ ;  $p < 0.0005$ ), thus supporting our second hypothesis that Leader-Member Exchange has a direct and positive effect on Psychological Capital. Thus, the Leader-Member Exchange has a significant positive influence on employees' Psychological Capital at the workplace.

Instead of Sobel's Test, Bias corrected Bootstrapping was used to evaluate the statistical significance of the indirect effect of Supervisor Dark Triad Traits on Psychological Capital through Learned Helplessness. Here, a significant indirect effect is ascertained by examining CIs obtained from repeated samplings whether they contain a zero or not (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). SPSS bootstrapped 5,000 samples to obtain bias-corrected CIs. These results presented in Table 3 suggested that the indirect effect between Supervisor Dark Triad (SDT) and Psychological Capital (PsyCap) through Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) ( $a*b$ ) did not contain zero  $-.154 [-.272, -.068]$ , which indicated a mediation effect between SDT and PsyCap through LMX, supported our hypothesis 3. The direct effect ( $c'$ ) is not statistically different from zero, as ( $\beta = -.076$ ;  $p=.321$ ), with a 95% confidence interval from  $-.212$  to  $.070$ . The total effect of Supervisor Dark Triad traits on Psychological Capital is  $c=-.225$ , which is also the sum of direct effect and indirect effects ( $c=c'+ ab$ ). This is also significant as ( $\beta = -.242$ ;  $p < 0.005$ ), with a 95% confidence interval from  $-.362$  to  $-.089$ . Using Monte Carlo Power Analyses for Indirect Effect tool by Schoemann et al., (2017), the power given the sample size for the indirect effect via Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) in the analysis was calculated which was found to be 1.00, for 1000 power analyses replications and 5000 Monte Carlo draws per replications.

**Table 3 Mediation and Indirect effects between Supervisor's Dark Triad (SDT) and Psychological Capital (PsyCap)**

Path	B	SE	p	$\beta$	LLCI	ULCI
<b>a</b>	-.147	.024	<b>.000</b>	-.423	-.195	-.099
<b>b</b>	1.049	.205	<b>.000</b>	.392	.644	1.455
<b>c'</b>	-.071	.071	.321	.076	-.212	.070
<b>c</b>	-.225	.069	<b>.001</b>	-.242	-.362	-.089
	<b>Indirect Effect</b>		<b>BootLLCI</b>	<b>BootULCI</b>		
<b>a*b</b>	-.154		-.272	-.068		



a,b,c' = Unstandardised coefficients \* $p < 0.05$

**Figure 2** Mediation model with LMX as a mediator between SDT and PsyCap

So, from the results, the influence of the Supervisor’s Dark Triad (SDT) personality traits on employees’ Psychological Capital is mediated by Leader-Member Exchange. The model with unstandardised path coefficients is illustrated in Figure 2.

## DISCUSSION

The research aimed to study the impact of a leader’s Dark Triad personality and their leadership style and behaviour on employees’ psychological state. Precisely, the effect of the perceived Supervisor’s DT personality traits on employees’ Psychological Capital via leader-member exchange quality was examined.

Supervisor’s Dark Triad (SDT) showed a significant negative correlation with LMX and is also a significant predictor of it.

Social Exchange Theory (SET), rooted in economic exchange theory, suggests that human interactions are driven by a cost-benefit analysis, aiming to maximise rewards and minimize costs. Resources exchanged can be tangible (money) or intangible (trust, recognition). In work settings, leaders expect employees to fulfil their roles, while employees seek benefits. High-quality Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) occurs when leaders provide additional recognition and opportunities for employees who exceed expectations.(Blau, 2017).

The Dark Triad, comprising Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy, describes socially aversive traits. Narcissistic leaders seek control, Machiavellian leaders manipulate, and psychopathic leaders are callous and impulsive. These traits lead to exploitative, manipulative, and unempathetic behaviour.

When followers perceive their leader as unconcerned, deceptive, and exploitative, trust erodes, leading to reduced performance, lack of commitment, and retaliatory behaviour. High-quality LMX, based on mutual trust and respect, is absent in relationships with dark trait leaders, resulting in decreased perceptions of fairness, cooperation, and communication. Leaders with Dark Triad traits—Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy—engage in manipulation, exploitation, and control. This breeds distrust and negative emotions, causing followers to reduce effort, flout reciprocity, and display less commitment. Ultimately, SDT diminishes LMX, weakening relationships and communication between supervisors and subordinates. Results in this study are corroborated by the previous findings of Fodor and others (2021).

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Further, SDT's influence can be explained by the Conservation of Resource Theory (Hobfoll, 1989). As stated by the CoR theory individuals are motivated to preserve their existing resources and acquire more resources. Therefore, supervisors with dark personality traits will seek to preserve their condition resources like status, power, and authority (obtained due to their position in the hierarchy of the organisation) over their subordinates. This intention in combination with their inherent traits of dominance, superiority, and control will make them perceived as abusive and stimulate low-quality exchanges with their employees.

LMX is positively correlated and significantly predicts employees' positive psychological state, i.e., Psychological Capital. SDT's influence can be understood through the Conservation of Resource (CoR) Theory, which suggests that when individuals are not under stress, they accumulate resources that benefit their future. These resources include object (e.g., cars, clothes), condition (e.g., social support, status), personal (e.g., abilities, hope), and energy (e.g., time, money). High-quality LMX is marked by mutual trust, loyalty, and reciprocity, with leader support, opportunities, and resources creating a conducive environment. This enables employees to build personal resources such as self-efficacy, resilience, hope, and optimism, fostering the growth of PsyCap.

The connection between LMX and PsyCap can be explained using Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory. PsyCap develops through acquiring and processing information from the social world, influenced by organizational context. In high-quality LMX, leaders offer feedback, model behaviour, and boost self-efficacy. Access to resources and support enhances resilience while goal-setting involvement fosters hope. A positive work environment and support from supervisors build optimism.

The study posited that LMX mediates the relationship between SDT and employees' Psychological Capital. Initially, SDT showed a weak negative correlation with PsyCap. The hypothesis regarding LMX's mediating effect was confirmed. Leaders with dark traits mistreat employees and build superficial, self-centered relationships, negatively impacting their psychological state. This environment reduces trust, fosters negative expectations, and depletes employees' resources like self-efficacy and resilience. According to the Conservation of Resources theory, leaders with dark traits engage in poor exchanges to conserve their power, while depleting their followers' psychological resources (PsyCap).

The study offers important insights into how leadership traits influence employees' psychological states, revealing the mechanisms behind these effects. Specifically, toxic and socially undesirable traits in leaders are reflected in their interactions with followers. Behaviours such as ignoring employee concerns, controlling resources or information, using sarcasm, disregarding opinions, publicly humiliating or threatening employees, and devaluing them, all demonstrate a leader's need for power and social dominance. These behaviours contribute to diminished positive psychological states in employees, which can lead to negative outcomes for both the individual and the organization.

## CONCLUSION

This study occupies the intersection of two contrasting areas in organizational science: positive organizational behaviour and the presence of dark personalities in the workplace. It investigates the influence of a leader's dark personality traits on employees' positive psychological states. The findings confirm the hypothesised negative impact of supervisors' dark personality traits on employees' Psychological Capital. Additionally, the study

enhances our understanding of how the effects of supervisors' dark traits are transmitted through the quality of the leader-member exchange.

### **Implications**

This study highlights the practical importance of fostering employees' Psychological Capital (PsyCap) by improving leader-member exchanges and implementing team-building strategies. PsyCap can be enhanced in organisations by investing in leadership training programs that promote high-quality relationships. Increased turnover, lower performance, and decreased morale lead to financial losses which can be reduced by addressing destructive leadership behaviours linked to dark personality traits. Early identification of toxic leadership and using personality assessments in recruitment and promotion can help mitigate these effects. Additionally, framing and adopting policies that empower employees and provide remedies against negative supervision in the organisation.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

The study has several limitations despite contributing significantly to organisational behaviour literature. As the questionnaire recorded followers' perceptions of their supervisor's Dark Triad traits, this may have led to self-other disagreement in personality assessments, which potentially can affect our study's outcomes. Additionally, data was collected in a single wave, raising concerns about common method bias, though Harman's single-factor test indicated that this was not an issue. The study also controlled for certain demographic variables but acknowledged that work characteristics, organizational culture, and other factors could have influenced the results. Assessing both subordinates' and supervisors' Dark Triad traits could have provided deeper insights into the dynamics of the study's variables. Lastly, exploring the similarity hypothesis based on employee-supervisor gender could have further explained the research outcomes, particularly in terms of LMX and abusive supervision.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

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