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Dark Triad Leadership and Counterproductive Work Behaviour in the Indian IT Sector: When Self-Efficacy and Monetary Incentives Amplify Rather Than Buffer

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Abstract

Dark Triad Traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy) have been the main focus of academic research due to their impact on employee behaviour and thus organizational effectiveness. In this study, the Social Exchange Theory is combined with the Conservation of Resources Theory to examine the moderating effect of Self-Efficacy and Monetary Incentives on the relationship between Dark Triad leadership traits with subordinates' Counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB) in the Indian IT sector. The existing literature has been based on subordinate-rated data of individuals, and research on the Dark Triad in the culturally unique context of the Indian IT sector has been limited and it predominantly within Western contexts. To solve this, the present study surveyed 540 IT employees in India and explored a PLS-SEM test of the leader-rated moderation model. Both self-efficacy and monetary incentives strengthened, but did not buffer, the association between dark leadership and CWB, and all three dark leadership traits were significant predictors of CWB, with Machiavellianism being the strongest. This is a turning around where individual and organizational resources designed to safeguard employees can become a catalyst for retaliation when the individuals in leadership are the ones causing the harm. The findings, in practice, highlight that the self-efficacy or offering higher salaries should not be seen as a quick fix as these strategies may have unintended consequences and lead to counterproductive work behaviour if they are not directly targeted at the dark triad leadership.

1. Introduction

The highly competitive organizational climate of the Indian information technology (IT) industry provides a setting in which leaders with Dark Triad (DT) personality traits, namely Narcissism, Machiavellianism and Psychopathy can have an unusually negative impact on the wellbeing and health of their subordinates. The Dark Triad is composed of three conceptually distinct but empirically correlated sub-dimensions: exploitativeness, self-centredness, and manipulativeness, as well as lack of empathy (Volmer et al., 2016; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). These characteristics of leaders have been linked to poor organizational climates, high levels of interpersonal conflict, and greater levels of subordinates' counterproductive work behavior (CWB) (Rizvi & Siddiqui, 2023), but the specific ways in which each characteristic negatively affects their organizations have not been understood fully or have proven to be contextually complex (Brender-Ilan & Sheaffer, 2019; O'Boyle et al., 2012). Empirically, Dark Triad traits have been correlated with negative outcomes among subordinates such as exploitation, moral disengagement, psychological distress, reduction of organizational trust, perceived injustice, and increased CWB (Aluja et al., 2022; Doerfler et al., 2021; Duradoni et al., 2023; Fernandez-del-Rio et al., 2022; Junca-Silva & Silva, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2021); CWB being one of the most consistently reported outcomes (Gomez-Leal et al., 2023; Kaufman et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2017; Ying & Cohen, 2018). The study uses two theoretical approaches. The relational logic comes from Social Exchange Theory (SET; Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano et al., 2017) which states that exchange in the workplace is regulated by reciprocity: fair treatment and organisational investment leads to employee effort, loyalty and compliance. The dark triad leaders do so through manipulation, exploitation, and emotional abuse, thus encouraging retaliatory CWB (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2023). Conservation of Resources Theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989) helps to complement SET by suggesting that people strive to conserve or maintain personal, social, and material resources. Dark Triad leaders cause chronic resource depletion to their employees and lead to psychological strain which in turn leads to higher likelihood of counterproductive responding among employees, while resource-rich employees better tolerate threats without engaging in deviance (Baloch et al., 2017). Thus, a relational norm violation that motivates retaliation is identified by SET and a process that causes resource depletion that would lead to or not lead to retaliation is specified by COR. Although many studies have been conducted, there are still a few gaps in the literature. There is evidence that Dark Triad traits are overrepresented in leaders and that leaders have a sustained impact on subordinates' outcomes over time (Cesinger et al., 2023), most studies take an individual-level perspective rather than a top-down perspective of the leader-to-subordinate relationship. Empirical studies of boundary conditions that weaken the link between Dark Triad and CWB are also scarce. The present study involves the two moderators, the first being self-efficacy in the sense of an employee's confidence in his/her ability to deal with adverse circumstances, which may protect them against the susceptibility of dark leadership and the second being monetary incentives as a tangible material resource that may realign employee goals with organizational objectives, thus lowering the occurrence of CWB. Moreover, the Indian IT industry, with its hierarchical structures, unrealistic expectations of high performance, short timelines, and communalistic cultural values (Bueno-de la Fuente et al., 2025) is a key place to investigate, but one that has not been studied empirically. In this respect, the present study presents five new contributions as compared to the previous studies. Firstly, this study designs both self-efficacy and monetary incentives for all three aspects of the Dark Triad and also has a cross level, multi-moderator Social Exchange Theory – COR model, which has not been tested as a whole. Third, this study examines self-efficacy and monetary incentives at the same time, while Palmer et al. (2017) only included one organisational-level moderator and Khattak et al. (2021) only focused on psychopathic supervision. Third, the Dark Triad traits are evaluated at the supervisor level and not at the individual level, because the personality traits are of more influence at the level of the employees (Cesinger et al., 2023). Fourth, trait-specific resource depletion mechanisms are developed and tested such as psychopathy destruction of psychological safety, narcissism's destruction of perceived fairness, and Machiavellianism destruction of trust; this provides a more nuanced explanation for why some traits are buffered more than others (Hobfoll, 1989). Fifth, these dynamics are situated in the Indian IT industry, which directly responds to the call for cross-cultural replication, transcending the body of western knowledge (Pradhan et al., 2022). The contributions comprise a theoretically based and empirically unique investigation on the association between dark triad leadership and CWB.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Dark Triad of Personality: Theoretical Foundation

The Dark Triad is a constellation of three highly undesirable subclinical personality traits – psychopathy, narcissism and Machiavellianism – that feature similar core traits of selfishness, reduced concern for others and interpersonal manipulation, but differ in motivations and behaviors (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The traits it encompasses — assertiveness, superficial charm, and projected confidence, etc. — are the very ones that help them get ahead in the world, but also help them manipulate, exploit and emotionally harm others, as described in the concept of dark leadership (Furtner et al., 2017). The traits of psychopathy consist of instability, affect shallowness, lack of remorse, decreased empathy and poor behavioural control (Hare &

Neumann, 2008). In the workplace, psychopathic leaders harm their employees, engage in unethical actions, and make impulsive decisions that are unfavourable to the workplace (Boddy, 2014; Mathieu & Babiak, 2015). They manifest through continued emotional abuse, bullying, and psychological intimidation, with a potential risk to the mental health of their subordinates (Boulter & Boddy, 2021; Mathieu et al., 2014). Boddy (2014) showed that the corporate psychopath's manipulation of subordinates is a dynamic that involves exploitation and retaliating against the victim, mainly by denying his or her personal dignity and psychological safety (Volmer et al., 2016). Raskin and Terry (1988) define narcissism as grandiosity, entitlement, a need for admiration, and exploitation of others for self-interest. Narcissistic leaders take credit for the achievements of their followers, blame others for their own shortcomings and react aggressively when they are threatened or challenged (Owens et al., 2015; Nevicka et al., 2018). Narcissism is not driven by fear and intimidation like psychopathy, but rather by the systematic violation of recognition and fairness norms, leading to high levels of perceptions of inequity, envy, withdrawal, and counterproductive behaviour among subordinates (Treadway et al., 2019). Machiavellianism is defined as having a cynical view of the world, being calculating, and using information, relationships, and reward systems strategically to benefit one's self (Dahling et al., 2009). The subordinates of Machiavellian leaders face greater procedural injustice and suspicion of decisions being made on the basis of manipulation and not on merit (Hussain et al., 2021). Greenbaum et al. (2017) have found that Machiavellian tactics foster negative work environments (abuse of power and loss of motivation) and Saleem et al. (2024) have shown that the leader's Machiavellianism leads to negative outcomes for subordinates (poor performance outcomes) through multilevel relational processes, namely through undermining of trust and perceived control (theory outlined here). Based on the SET–COR model presented in the introduction, the psychological safety, perceived fairness and valued contribution, and trust and control over work outcomes are thought to be depleted through qualitatively different resource depletion pathways in the context of the Dark Triad. These trait-specific mechanisms build up over time, and more and more gradually increase the likelihood of CWB as a defensive coping response and, critically, provide an explanation for the varying effects of the two moderators investigated in Sections 2.3 and 2.4.

2.2 Counterproductive Work Behaviour

Comprising of the negative actions employees engage in that harm the organization or other employees, including theft, sabotage, absenteeism, interpersonal aggression and intentional under performance (Marcus et al., 2016), these are defined as Counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB). In line with the findings of O'Boyle et al. (2012), the meta-analysis conducted by the authors showed that all three Dark Triad factors were significantly associated with CWB, with moderate to large effect sizes with findings supported by Carpenter and Berry (2017) and Yao et al. (2022) who indicated that CWB also had consequences for the long-term reputational value of the perpetrators and on organisational cohesion. The cross-national variation is an important contextual boundary condition. Abusive supervision and deviance are found to be different in Indian workers and Western workers (Martinko et al., 2013; Pradhan et al., 2022) which suggests that power distance and deference norms impact the relationship between abusive supervision and deviance. The work environment in the Indian IT sector is highly demanding, stressful, hierarchical, and has high rates of voluntary turnover, making this context a prime environment for the emergence of DT leadership types and its potential to increase resource depletion and CWB. However, empirical studies on this population are largely lacking, which is addressed directly in the present research. It is significant in the context of the international strategic sector.

2.3 Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy

An exploitative leader's tendency to retaliate is not consistently held by employees; some resist the urge to retaliate even when they are faced with chronic norm violations. Bandura (1986) identified self-efficacy as an individual's confidence in their ability to perform behaviours to achieve the desired outcomes when the situation is challenging. As in COR, high self-efficacy employees have more personal resources to draw from, and can reinterpret their negative perception of the leader as something they can handle, instead of as a lost resource thus breaking the cycle of resource depletion that culminates in CWB. Erkutlu and Chafra (2020) found that when moral efficacy was high, violations of integrity and interpersonal deviance were not related. As mentioned above, Zhou et al. (2021) showed that self-efficacy buffers the impact of despotic leadership on performance and satisfaction, and most directly, Khattak et al. (2021) revealed that psychological capital which includes self-efficacy moderates the relationship between psychopathic supervision and CWB. The present study adds to this evidence by investigating the role of self-efficacy as a moderator in all three dimensions of the Dark Triad.

2.4 Moderating Role of Monetary Incentives

Monetary incentives refer to base wage payments, performance-based bonuses, and direct financial rewards and one of the main resources of the organisation and a tangible indicator of the value and place of employees in the employment relationship. Fair compensation, as per SET, is an organisational-level reciprocity signal that can mitigate CWB motivation in instances where employees feel that their organisation values and their contribution remain beyond the actions of their supervisor (i.e., norm violations by the supervisor), thus reducing motivation for CWB. As in COR, adequate monetary compensation produces material resources that rein in CWB caused by the Dark Triad Traits, while inequitable compensation exacerbates resource loss and increases motivation for such behaviour. Incentive system quality was identified as a boundary condition of Machiavellian supervision by Khan et al. (2023), while Kulchmanov and Kaliannan (2014), using non-Western data, showed that perceived reward adequacy maintained motivation in context of poor leadership quality.

3. Hypothesis Development and Conceptual Model

Hypothesis Development

Hypothesis	Relationship	Hypothesis Statement	Key Supporting References
H1	Machiavellianism → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Machiavellianism has a positive and significant influence on Counterproductive Work Behaviour.	Greenbaum et al. (2017); Saleem et al. (2024); O'Boyle et al. (2012)
H2	Monetary Incentives → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Monetary Incentives have a significant influence on Counterproductive Work Behaviour.	Gerhart & Fang (2015); Kulchmanov & Kaliannan (2014); Khan et al. (2023)
H3	Narcissism → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Narcissism has a positive and significant influence on Counterproductive Work Behaviour.	Owens et al. (2015); Nevicka et al. (2018); O'Boyle et al. (2012)
H4	Psychopathy → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Psychopathy has a positive and significant influence on Counterproductive Work Behaviour.	Boddy (2014); Mathieu et al. (2014); Volmer et al. (2016)
H5	Self-Efficacy → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Self-Efficacy has a negative and significant influence on Counterproductive Work Behaviour.	Bandura (1986); Zhou et al. (2021); Erkutlu & Chafra (2020)
H6	Self-Efficacy × Machiavellianism → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Self-Efficacy moderates the relationship between Machiavellianism and Counterproductive Work Behaviour such that the relationship becomes weaker at higher levels of Self-Efficacy.	Bandura (1986); Hobfoll (1989); Khattak et al. (2021)
H7	Self-Efficacy × Psychopathy → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Self-Efficacy moderates the relationship between Psychopathy and Counterproductive Work Behaviour such that the relationship becomes weaker at higher levels of Self-Efficacy.	Khattak et al. (2021); Zhou et al. (2021); Hobfoll (1989)
H8	Self-Efficacy × Narcissism → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Self-Efficacy moderates the relationship between Narcissism and Counterproductive Work Behaviour such that the relationship becomes weaker at higher levels of Self-Efficacy.	Bandura (1986); Erkutlu & Chafra (2020); Zhou et al. (2021)
H9	Monetary Incentives × Narcissism → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Monetary Incentives moderate the relationship between Narcissism and Counterproductive Work Behaviour such that the relationship becomes weaker when Monetary Incentives are perceived as fair and adequate.	Gerhart & Fang (2015); Kulchmanov & Kaliannan (2014)
H10	Monetary Incentives × Psychopathy → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Monetary Incentives moderate the relationship between Psychopathy and Counterproductive Work Behaviour such that the relationship becomes weaker when Monetary Incentives are perceived as fair and adequate.	Hobfoll (1989); Khan et al. (2023); Kulchmanov & Kaliannan (2014)
H11	Monetary Incentives × Machiavellianism → Counterproductive Work Behaviour	Monetary Incentives moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and Counterproductive Work Behaviour such that the relationship becomes weaker when Monetary Incentives are perceived as fair and adequate.	Khan et al. (2023); Gerhart & Fang (2015); Hobfoll (1989)

3.4 Conceptual Model:

The conceptual model (Fig. 1) has the three Dark Triad dimensions of leadership (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy) as primary antecedents of counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB), which is in consistent with the reciprocity violation framework of SET and the depletion logic of COR. Self-Efficacy and Monetary Incentives are assumed to moderate the effect of each Dark Triad and CWB relationship: the former is individually protective while the latter is organisational protective (Bandura, 1986; Hobfoll, 1989; Gerhart & Fang, 2015). In addition, the self-efficacy is modelled as a direct negative predictor of CWB.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Sample

The present research used quantitative, cross sectional survey design to investigate the impact of Dark Triad leadership on Counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB) with the moderating effect of Self-Efficacy and Monetary Incentives. Non-probability sampling was used to collect the Data. Structured self report questionnaires were administered to employees from different IT sector organisations from India. A research design and sample were developed. Companies were chosen on the basis of three criteria: They had a hierarchical matrix organizational structure, multiple layers of leadership, and a performance-oriented, competitive setting with tight project deadlines, reflecting the operational challenges of this fast-paced business. These organizational attributes create a perfect environment for employees to experience stress because of dark leadership characteristics. The sample for the study was obtained through non-probability sampling, and 540 respondents were finally obtained for the analysis due to incomplete or inconsistent answers. The convenience sampling method was used as the practicality of obtaining a complete sampling frame of IT employees and their supervisors throughout India was challenging. Only those who had been directly reporting to their current supervisor for a minimum of 6 months were included in the respondents, as this allowed them to have a valid experience of rating the leadership behaviour of this supervisor.

4.2 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1
Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 540)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	312	57.8
	Female	228	42.2
	Total	**540**	**100**
Age Group	20–30 Years	214	39.6
	31–40 Years	186	34.4
	41–50 Years	98	18.1
	Above 50 Years	42	7.9
	Total	**540**	**100**
Educational Qualification	Undergraduate	96	17.8
	Postgraduate	444	82.2
	Total	**540**	**100**
Work Experience	Less than 2 Years	104	19.3
	2–5 Years	228	42.2
	6–10 Years	146	27
	Above 10 Years	62	11.5
	Total	**540**	**100**
Sector of Employment	Private Sector	336	62.2
	Others	204	37.8
	Total	**540**	**100**

This section outlines the major demographic features of the sample of the survey. Gender, 57.8% of the respondents were male, while 42.2% were female. The age group with the majority of the sample were 20–30 years (39.6%) and 31–40 years (34.4%). 82.2% had a post-graduate degree and 17.8% had an undergraduate degree. The largest single work experience band was 42.2% with 2–5 years experience followed by 27% having 6–10 years experience. Of which 62.2% were in the private sector. In general, the sample is skewed toward young to middle-aged IT employees, with moderate experience in the workplace, and who work in the private sector.

4.3 Measurement Model — PLS-SEM Results

PLS-SEM

Source: SmartPLS

The factor loading of each of the indicators was higher than 0.88 which means the indicator reliability and indicator validity were good (Hair et al., 2022). The loadings are similar to previous studies that have shown a connection between the Dark Triad Traits and Counterproductive work behaviours (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; O'Boyle et al., 2012).

Table 2
PLS-SEM Reliability and Validity Matrix Source: Source: SmartPLS

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Counter Productive Work Behaviour	0.949	0.949	0.961	0.831
Machiavellianism	0.943	0.943	0.959	0.853
Monetary Incentive	0.927	0.927	0.948	0.820
Narcissism	0.932	0.934	0.951	0.830
Psychopathy	0.928	0.929	0.949	0.822
Self Efficacy	0.941	0.958	0.955	0.809

The outer loadings, reliability and validity statistics resulting from the PLS-SEM measurement model are presented in the table. The outer loadings of all reflective indicators ranged from 0.885 to 0.929, much higher than the minimum value of 0.70, and thus demonstrating high indicator reliability. Cronbach's Alpha values were between 0.927 and 0.949, while the composite reliability values (rho c) ranged from 0.948 to 0.961, well above the 0.70 threshold. AVE

values were between 0.809 and 0.853, which were significantly higher than the minimum value of 0.50 recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), indicating good convergent validity. Interaction terms were represented as single item constructs in PLS-SEM and thus have factor loadings of 1.000 (by definition) (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 3
Discriminant Validity (HTMT Matrix) Source: SmartPLS

Variables	Counter Productive Work Behaviour	Machiavellianism	Monetary Incentive	Narcissism	Psychopathy	Self Efficacy	Self Efficacy x Machiavellianism	Self Efficacy x Psychopathy	Self Efficacy x Narci
Machiavellianism	0.68								
Monetary Incentive	0.48	0.48							
Narcissism	0.59	0.52	0.31						
Psychopathy	0.58	0.37	0.17	0.41					
Self Efficacy	0.12	0.03	0.03	0.18	0.03				
Self Efficacy x Machiavellianism	0.23	0.01	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.03			
Self Efficacy x Psychopathy	0.15	0.01	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.35		
Self Efficacy x Narcissism	0.20	0.04	0.03	0.06	0.03	0.04	0.52	0.42	
Monetary Incentive x Narcissism	0.11	0.02	0.06	0.03	0.05	0.02	0.07	0.14	0.03
Monetary Incentive x Psychopathy	0.22	0.02	0.06	0.04	0.10	0.04	0.05	0.08	0.12
Monetary Incentive x Machiavellianism	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.01

The Fornell–Larcker criterion was used as the index to assess the discriminant validity. The inter-construct correlations ranged from 0.01 to 0.68 which were lower than the square root of the AVE value for all constructs (Table 3). This validates that the discriminant validity is satisfactory as each construct, with all of its respective indicators, correlates well with the other constructs in question. In addition, because the value of the maximum correlation is below 0.85, which is the recommended limit by Joseph F. Hair Jr. et al., (2016), multicollinearity and construct overlap problems are not encountered either.

Table 4
Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) — Collinearity Statistics Source: SmartPLS

S.No	Variables	VIF
1	Machiavellianism -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.584
2	Monetary Incentive -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.273
3	Monetary Incentive x Machiavellianism -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.518
4	Monetary Incentive x Narcissism -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.542
5	Monetary Incentive x Psychopathy -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.373
6	Narcissism -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.493
7	Psychopathy -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.242
8	Self-Efficacy -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.048
9	Self-Efficacy x Machiavellianism -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.423
10	Self-Efficacy x Narcissism -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.541
11	Self-Efficacy x Psychopathy -> Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.281

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to evaluate multicollinearity. If the VIF values are greater than 5.0, there is no serious multicollinearity in PLS-SEM models as per Hair et al. (2016). The results

showed that all VIF values were in the range of 1.048 to 1.584 which were below the recommended cut-off value. Hence, the results prove that there is no multicollinearity between the predictor constructs in the structural model and, thus, all predictor constructs can successfully remain in a further analysis.

Table 5
Path Coefficients Source: SmartPLS

Variables	Counter Productive Work Behaviour
Counter Productive Work Behaviour	1.000
Machiavellianism	0.355
Monetary Incentive	0.160
Narcissism	0.264
Psychopathy	0.276
Self Efficacy	-0.166
Self-Efficacy x Machiavellianism	0.158
Self-Efficacy x Psychopathy	-0.005
Self-Efficacy x Narcissism	0.112
Monetary Incentive x Narcissism	0.021
Monetary Incentive x Psychopathy	0.148
Monetary Incentive x Machiavellianism	-0.045

Path coefficients showed that Machiavellianism (β = 0.355), Psychopathy (β = 0.276), and Narcissism (β = 0.264) all positively predicted Counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB), consistent with the theorized negative influence of Dark Triad leadership. Self-Efficacy showed a significant negative direct effect on CWB (β = −0.166), while several of the moderating interaction terms — notably Self-Efficacy × Machiavellianism (β = 0.158) and Monetary Incentive × Psychopathy (β = 0.148) — were also significant. These direct-effect findings corroborate prior research linking the Dark Triad to negative organizational outcomes (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; O'Boyle et al., 2012).

Table 6
Outer loading Matrix Source: SmartPLS

Variables	Counter Productive Work Behaviour	Machiavellianism	Monetary Incentive	Narcissism	Psychopathy	Self Efficacy	Self Efficacy x Machiavellianism	Self Efficacy x Psychopathy	Self Efficacy Narci
CWB1	0.917								
CWB2	0.897								
CWB3	0.909								
CWB4	0.918								
CWB5	0.918								
MACH1		0.929							
MACH2		0.921							
MACH3		0.929							
MACH4		0.915							
MI1			0.900						
MI2			0.906						
MI3			0.910						
MI4			0.908						
NAR1				0.900					
NAR2				0.920					
NAR3				0.907					
NAR4				0.917					
PSY1					0.910				
PSY2					0.913				
PSY3					0.900				
PSY4					0.904				
SE1						0.885			
SE2						0.914			
SE3						0.895			
SE4						0.905			
SE5						0.897			
Monetary Incentive x Machiavellianism									
Monetary Incentive x Narcissism									
Monetary Incentive x Psychopathy									
Self Efficacy x Machiavellianism							1.000		
Self Efficacy x Narcissism									1.000
Self Efficacy x Psychopathy								1.000	

All reflective indicators have outer loadings greater than the threshold of 0.70, establishing acceptable indicator reliability. The indicated loadings of 0.885 to 0.929 for the main constructs indicate adequate convergent validity. Third, all moderating interaction terms were specified as single-item-constructs in the PLS algorithm and therefore all had a factor loading of 1.000 (Hair et al., 2016).

4.4 Model Fit — PLS-SEM

Table 7
PLS-SEM Model Fit Indices Source: SmartPLS

Values	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.027	0.027
d_ULS	0.254	0.251
d_G	0.215	0.212
Chi-square	709.724	698.871
NFI	0.947	0.948

The fit of the PLS-SEM framework model was assessed by the SRMR, d_ULS, d_G, Chi-square and NFI indices. Both of them had an SRMR of less than 0.08 (Hair et al., 2022) showing very good model fit (x (≤ 0.05 is a good fit, ≤ 01 an acceptable fit). Furthermore, the values of NFI were 0.947 and 0.948 which is higher than the recommended threshold value of 0.90, showing a good fit between the observed and expected models. This is also confirmed by the low values of the model fitting statistics d_ULS (0.254; 0.251) and d_G (0.215; 0.212). The indices indicate that the proposed structural model has a good and acceptable fit with the data (Hair et al., 2022) and the model's explanatory power (R^2) is presented in Table 8 below.

Table 8
Coefficient of Determination Source: SmartPLS

Dependent Variable	R-square	R-square adjusted
Counter Productive Work Behaviour	0.710	0.704

The coefficient of determination (R^2 = 0.710, R^2adj = 0.704) shows that practically 71.0% of the variance in Counterproductive Work Behaviour is explained by the predictor variables. This is higher than the threshold for large effect size in PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2019) which suggests strong predictive and explanatory power for the structural model.

4.5 Structural Model — Hypothesis Testing

The outcomes of the bootstrapped hypothesis tests are given in Table 7. All eleven hypothesized paths are reported for path coefficients (β), sample means (M), standard deviations (STDEV), T-statistics and p-values.

Table 9
Hypothesis Testing Table Source: SmartPLS

Hypothesis	Variables	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics	P values	Decision
H1	Machiavellianism -> CWB	0.355	0.355	0.030	11.650	0.000	Supported
H2	MI -> CWB	0.160	0.161	0.028	5.726	0.000	Supported
H11	MI x Machiavellianism -> CWB	-0.045	-0.044	0.028	1.579	0.114	Not supported
H9	MI x Narcissism -> CWB	0.021	0.021	0.030	0.704	0.481	Not supported
H10	MI x Psychopathy -> CWB	0.148	0.147	0.026	5.666	0.000	Supported
H3	Narcissism -> CWB	0.264	0.263	0.030	8.743	0.000	Supported
H4	Psychopathy -> CWB	0.276	0.277	0.027	10.092	0.000	Supported
H5	Self-Efficacy -> CWB	-0.166	-0.166	0.027	6.149	0.000	Supported
H6	SE x Machiavellianism -> CWB	0.158	0.157	0.028	5.555	0.000	Supported
H8	SE x Narcissism -> CWB	0.112	0.110	0.032	3.511	0.000	Supported
H7	SE x Psychopathy -> CWB	-0.005	-0.005	0.026	0.176	0.860	Not Supported

Note: SE = Self-efficacy, MI = Monetary incentives, CWB = Counterproductive work behaviour. The results supported all three direct effects of the Dark Triad (H1–H4), all of which were positive and statistically significant. With respect to the direct effects, Self-Efficacy had a significant negative effect on CWB (H5, $p < 0.001$). Monetary Incentives also had a significant direct effect on CWB (H2, $\beta = 0.160$, $p < 0.001$), which is counter to the hypothesized direction (see Section 5.1). Three of the six moderation hypotheses were supported by the results: Self-Efficacy × Machiavellianism (H6, $\beta = 0.158$), Self-Efficacy × Narcissism (H8, $\beta = 0.112$), and Monetary Incentives × Psychopathy (H10, $\beta = 0.148$), whereas three were rejected: Self-Efficacy × Psychopathy (H7), Monetary Incentives × Narcissism (H9), and Monetary Incentives × Machiavellianism (H11). However, with respect to the interaction effects, all three were

positive instead of the negative (buffering) direction hypothesized as in H6, H8 and H10. This "reversed" pattern of moderation is treated in detail in Section 5.2.

5. Discussion

5.1 Direct Effects of Dark Triad Leadership on CWB

The significant positive relationships of Machiavellianism with CWB (β = 0.355), Narcissism with CWB (β = 0.264) and Psychopathy with CWB (β = 0.276) backed H1, H3, and H4, respectively, by supporting the findings of meta-analysis done by O'Boyle et al. (2012) and also confirming the SET-based argument that Dark Triad leaders create negative reciprocity dynamics that encourage retaliatory deviance (Ahmad et al., 2023). In the Indian IT context, hierarchical trust and transparent reward allocation are essential to subordinates' motivation, as seen in the strong influence of Machiavellianism on their attitudes, which is consistent with Saleem et al. (2024) and Greenbaum et al. (2017). The positive direct effect of Monetary Incentives on CWB (β = 0.160, p < 0.001) goes against H2's theoretical predictions. In the Indian context, a plausible COR interpretation is that high monetary incentives in the IT industry are often paired with the high motivational conditions for CWB (Hobfoll, 1989) due to factors such as, high motivational conditions, increased monitoring, longer hours, etc. Further investigation is required, using longitudinal or qualitative studies. H5 was supported by the significant and negative relationship found between self-efficacy and CWB (β = −0.166, p < 0.001). In line with Bandura (1986) and Zhou et al. (2021), employees who have the belief that they can tackle adverse events engage in a proactive coping approach instead of revengeful reactions.

5.2 Moderation Effects

The three moderation hypotheses were statistically supported (H6, H8, H10), and all three of the significant moderation effects had positive (not protective) coefficients, the most theoretically interesting results in the study. The interaction between self-efficacy and Machiavellianism (H6: β = 0.158, p < 0.001) and self-efficacy and narcissism (H8: β = 0.112, p < 0.001) indicate what is usually called a "moral licensing" or "entitled retaliation" effect: when employees perceive systematic manipulation or unfairness, they may feel empowered to retaliate explicitly as opposed to suppressing the retaliatory impulse. Khattak et al. (2021) argue that in the event of severe procedural injustice, psychological empowerment could stimulate employee deviance, such as retaliatory CWB, as opposed to inhibit it, since low self-efficacy employees have a lack of psychological agency to act against injustice. The interaction of the Monetary Incentives × Psychopathy (β = 0.148, p < 0.001; H10) is also opposite to what was predicted. If employees feel that they have been paid fairly, they presume that they are being treated fairly – and when the psychopathic leadership is treating them poorly, causing emotional exploitation and maintaining an environment of fear, the perceived injustice is multiplied. Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 also have informative content. The interaction between Self-Efficacy × Psychopathy was not significant (β = −0.005, p = 0.860, H7), which aligns with COR's theory that some threats can overwhelm even well-resourced individuals. In the same way, the non-significant Monetary Incentives × Narcissism (H9) and Monetary Incentives × Machiavellianism (H11) effects suggest that monetary rewards are not a substitute for the relational aspects of the leadership (fairness, recognition, and procedural trust) that is lacking from narcissist and Machiavellian leaders, respectively, underscoring the importance of the match between the types of resources threatened and the types of resources provided.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The research makes four unique contributions to the dark leadership and organizational psychology literature. First, it brings dark leadership research into the domain of Indian IT and provides evidence that the concept of reciprocity at macro level of the economy does not always play out in the predicted manner, and at the same time, it brings down the concept of norm violation from the general organizational level to micro level of supervisory level. Second, it contributes to Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory by showing that the mechanisms of resource depletion are not identical, but rather are highly trait-specific such that different dark personalities affect specific resource depletion mechanisms. Third, the top-down research design offers methodological realism by making the organization look like it does in the real world and by capturing the downward flow of the destructive nature of dark personalities to the greatest impact on the most subordinate. Fourth, the positive moderation effects are counterintuitive and add an important new path of theoretical research: Under toxic supervision, psychological resources, such as self-efficacy, and material resources (in the form of high compensation) do not prevent deviance, but rather facilitate retaliatory agency by making resource-rich employees feel they can feel good about themselves and actively retaliate. This is in accordance with Bandura's (1986) conception of self-efficacy as an agentic resource that which influences not only whether or not a person will act but how much they will do when provoked.

6.2 Practical Implications

The results are concerning for HR practitioners and tech executives – and more than just an issue that can be addressed with quick fixes. Organizations should first overlook superficial charisma and confidence during the process of executive hiring and promotion and adopt validated psychometric questionnaires to assess whether they have subclinical levels of Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy before they are elevated to the status of a leader (Boddy, 2014; Boulter & Boddy, 2021). Second, Machiavellianism was the strongest predictor of employee deviance which means that organizations need to create transparent and auditable performance appraisals and rewards processes to counteract information asymmetry, and to directly remove the Machiavellian supervisor's ability to manipulate the processes. Third, although coaching, mentoring and role clarity can successfully increase employee self-esteem, the result that high self-efficacy can trigger CWB in a toxic leadership environment indicates that the employee's agency needs to be managed in conjunction with the leader's culture and psychological capital, because increasing this without eliminating the toxic leader would be an active way to enhance the likelihood of retaliation. Lastly, financial incentives are not a substitute for good moral leadership, good relationally fair and good leadership, so it is not an incentive scheme to out-compensate or to cover up for a bad workplace culture.

7. Limitations and Future Research:

This study has some limitations that need to be addressed in future research. The cross-sectional design does not allow for causation to be determined as well, because reverse causality and confounding factors cannot be excluded. Longitudinal designs and experience sampling methods would better reflect the accumulation of the leadership exposure of the Dark Triad and the changes in employee responses over time. Second, single-source, self-report data may lead to the common method bias. The Harman's single factor test resulted in no significant bias, the future studies should use multi-source data collection method, the marker-variable method or the unmeasured latent factor method for more reliable evaluation. Thirdly, the convenience sampling restricted the representation of the IT industry. The external validity of the current study could be enhanced in future studies by using a stratified random sampling of IT workers with confirmed IT careers. Fourth, significant moderation effects were positive in a surprising direction and should be explored in a dedicated manner. Future studies should use simple slope analysis of interaction plots, experimental manipulations, and qualitative methods that clarify when, and under what conditions, self-efficacy and monetary incentives spur, rather than stifle, the likelihood of retaliatory CWB in the presence of dark leadership. Lastly, the study used moderation patterns to infer the resource depletion mechanisms of COR rather than measuring them. Future studies need to explicitly include psychological safety, perceived fairness and trust as mediators, and other COR-relevant constructs such as emotional exhaustion, perceived organisational support, psychological capital and job demands as mediators and moderators. To check the moderating effect of power distance and collectivism on the relationship between the Dark Triad and CWB, cross-cultural replication with Indian and Western IT sector samples could be conducted.

8. Conclusion

This study was an attempt to explore the relationship between Dark Triad leadership (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy) with Counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB) in the Indian IT industry with the moderating effect of Self-Efficacy and Monetary Incentives. Based on Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, PLS-SEM analysis was performed with 540 respondents to find the relationship between all three Dark Triad dimensions and CWB. All three Dark Triad dimensions had significant positive direct effects on CWB with Machiavellianism being the strongest predictor, while Self-Efficacy had a significant negative direct effect on CWB. Three moderation hypotheses were supported in their statistical analyses, but all the statistically significant interaction effects were positive (not buffering) an unexpected result that contradicts mainstream understanding and supports an alternative interpretation that self-efficacy and monetary incentives may, under certain dark leadership conditions, facilitate rather than inhibit retaliatory deviance. These findings show that toxic leadership is contextual and that the need for leadership interventions is multi-faceted and require integrated, system-level approaches to dealing with both the toxic leadership and the psychological resources of subordinates at the same time.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC), G.L. Bajaj Institute of Technology and Management, Greater Noida, India (Approval Date: 10th July 2026).

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study. Participants were informed about the objectives of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, and their right to refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Completion and submission of the questionnaire were considered as evidence of informed consent.

Consent to Publish

Not applicable. The manuscript does not contain any individual person's data, images, or other personal information requiring consent for publication.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

Authors will provide data as and when it will be required

Funding Statement

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Author Contribution

Author Contributions: Author 1 conceived the study, developed the conceptual framework, and designed the research model. Author 2 developed the research methodology, performed the data analysis, and interpreted the results. Author 3 contributed to manuscript structuring, reference management, and manuscript editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures

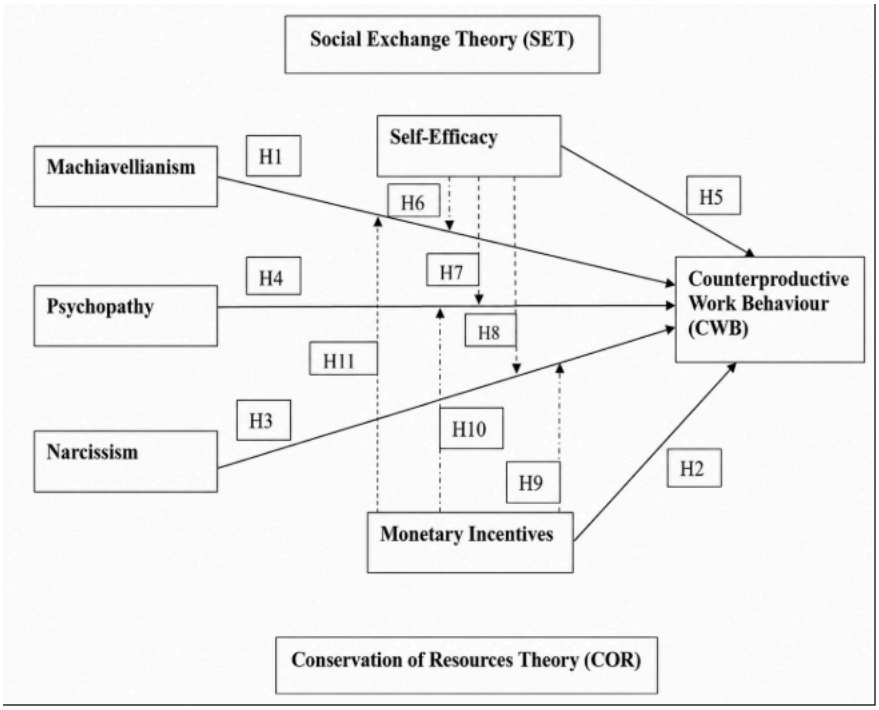


Figure 1

Conceptual Framework (Author's Own Work)

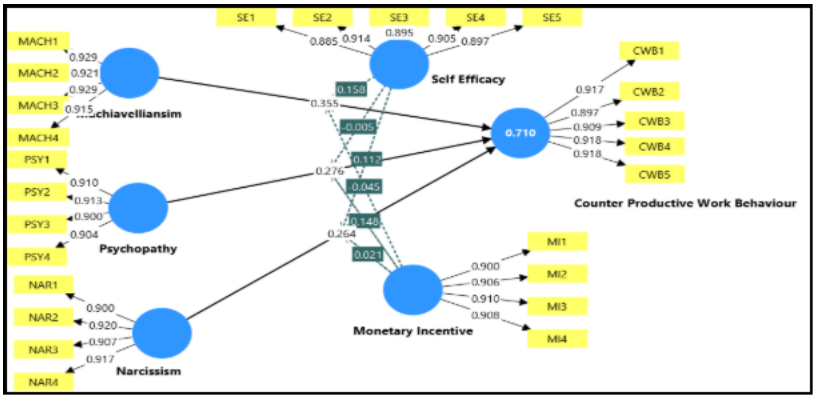


Figure 2

PLS-SEM Model

Source: SmartPLS

Supplementary Files

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- Appendix.docx