

The Role of Psychological Contract Breach and Leader-Member Exchange Quality in Dark Triad Personalities and Organizational Cynicism among Hotel Employees in China

Hao Wu

haowu0530@gmail.com

Liupanshui Normal University

Anusuiya Subramaniam

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Syafiqah Rahamat

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Article

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Abstract

Although prior researchers were interested in Dark triad personalities among organizations, the research domain remains in its infancy. To fill the existing literature gaps, the study aims to examine the mediating impact of psychological contract breaches on the relationship between dark triad personalities and organizational cynicism and the moderating influence of leader-member exchange quality on the association between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism. This study gathered data at three-time points from hotel employees in China between October and November 2025, using a multi-wave survey conducted across 50 star-rated hotels in major cities of Southwest China. A final dataset of 545 valid responses was used for structural equation modeling analysis. Hotel managers could focus on strengthening the construction of psychological contracts to mitigate the negative effects. Furthermore, establishing a conducive relationship between leaders and subordinates is crucial in an organization.

Introduction

Cynicism originated in ancient Greece (445– 365 B.C.), with the Chinese Zhuangzi School sharing similar perspectives (Schmitz et al., 2018) in expressing strong dissatisfaction and unsympathetic criticism of the political system within a society. Comparatively, cynicism in modern management reflects an individual's negative attitude and emotion toward organizations and peers (Mignonac et al., 2017). Employee cynicism has become a regular feature of organizational research (Soomro et al., 2022) in recent years, especially in China, with rapid economic growth and social changes that create a complex organizational environment (Zhang & Frenkel, 2017) that further elevates the prevalence of organizational cynicism. However, research on the antecedents of organizational cynicism remains limited, particularly regarding how individual personality traits influence its development (Wu et al., 2024). In addition, Chinese human resource practices are constantly unsatisfactory, particularly in the hotel industry, due to the massive working population (Zopiatis et al., 2014; Gong et al., 2022). Organizational cynicism, as an attitude characterized by indifference, selfishness, and lack of emotion, is gradually emerging and spreading in the organizational culture of hotels (Durrah et al., 2025). It is disturbing that organizational cynicism spreads among hotel organizations, which generates negative impacts, such as declined employee performance (Arslan & Roudaki, 2019), emotional exhaustion (Gkorezis et al., 2015) and low union commitment (Ahn et al., 2021), that might lead to irreversible negative consequences for the organization. Therefore, the formation factors of organizational cynicism deserve the attention of academia and industry.

Personality traits are pivotal and guiding in the evolution of organizational cynicism, as they can shape employees' attitudes within their professional and social spheres (Wu et al., 2024). Dark triad personalities have become the focus of psychological research in today's complex and changing organizational environment (Li et al., 2020). Dark triad personalities, which comprise Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism, have become the mainstream paradigm in assessing personality traits over the past several years (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Dark triad personalities are primarily manifested as self-interested and exploitative social devices frequently associated with manipulative and dishonest behavior (Forsyth et al., 2021). In social psychology, dark personality traits are often considered detrimental to organizations (Schimmenti et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite growing interest in dark triad personalities and their organizational consequences, empirical research on how these traits influence employee attitudes remains in its infancy.

On the other hand, situational factors are integral to determining the dark triad personalities impact (Ying & Cohen, 2018; Paleczek et al., 2018; Cohen & Özsoy, 2021). Certain scholars propounded that personality would influence attitudes more indirectly than directly (Mahmood et al., 2021). Contemporarily, the concept of the psychological contract garners significant traction (Cohen, 2012) due to the significance of understanding employment relationships. Psychological contract breach refers to employees' perception that their organization has failed to fulfil promised obligations in the employee-employer relationship (Li et al., 2020). Nonetheless, more research is required to ascertain the psychological contract breach impact on triggering dark triad personalities. Meanwhile, academicians recently concentrated on the positive impact of leader-member exchange quality on employees' job attitudes (Li et al., 2018). Considering the detrimental psychological contract breach outcomes, evaluating and comprehending the factors contributing to higher leader-member exchange quality are essential to

reduce the adverse effects. However, existing studies have rarely integrated the two perspectives of individual personality traits and situational triggers within a unified framework to explain how organizational cynicism develops in the hospitality context.

Summarily, the study sought to fulfil three main objectives. Specifically, the study investigated the influence of dark triad personalities on organizational cynicism, examined the psychological contract breach influence on triggering dark triad personalities to produce organizational cynicism, and corroborated the moderator role of leader-member exchange quality on the psychological contract breach effect on organizational cynicism.

This study makes substantial contributions to both theoretical comprehension and practical applications. Theoretically, it substantiates the impact of dark triad personalities on organizational cynicism. Limited research has delved into the determinants of organizational cynicism, particularly within the hospitality industry, as highlighted by Chiaburu et al. (2013). Moreover, through the review of the existing literature, there are no studies to verify the impact of dark triad personalities on organizational cynicism. Although variables such as employee retention and job satisfaction have been widely studied in hospitality management research, they are typically influenced by external and organizational factors (Bakir et al., 2025; Aboutaleb et al., 2025). In contrast, organizational cynicism represents a more proximal psychological outcome that reflects employees' emotional and cognitive evaluations of their work environment (Aboramadan et al., 2021). This focus is significant, as organizational cynicism may be an early warning signal of deteriorating employee behavior and job performance (del Pilar Pulido-Ramírez et al., 2025). Thus, this study aims to fill the gap in this research field. Secondly, the extent to which psychological contract breach acts as a situational mediator in mediating the influence of dark triad personalities on organizational cynicism has yet to be discovered. This study identifies the mediating role of psychological contract breach in this process and enriches the existing theoretical framework. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that while Pfrombeck et al. (2020) demonstrated the moderating impact of leader-member exchange quality on the relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism, it is essential to acknowledge that, like many studies, their research was conducted in a Western context. Given the unique cultural and structural characteristics of different countries, there is a need for further exploration of this relationship in the Chinese context (Li et al., 2018). Therefore, this study investigates the moderating effect of leader-member exchange quality on the relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism among Chinese hotel employees, filling a gap in empirical research. On a practical level, this study provides valuable insights that enable hotel managers to comprehend the impact of dark triad personalities on organizational cynicism and the role of psychological contract breaches, specifically focusing on Chinese hotel employees. This study serves as a guide for managing organizational cynicism in Chinese hotel organizations. Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of the quality of leader-member exchange in shaping employees' perceptions and attitudes. Recognizing this dynamic emphasizes the potential of organizational leaders to foster more positive and mutually beneficial relationships with their workforce, ultimately cultivating a healthier and more productive work environment.

Hypothesis Development

Dark triad personalities and organizational cynicism

Dean et al. (1998) defined organizational cynicism as a negative attitude toward an organization, consisting of three aspects: the lack of integrity, the negative affective, and the demeaning and critical behaviors of the organization (Dean et al., 1998). Notably, a significant difference exists between trait cynicism and attitude cynicism. Trait cynicism refers to negative beliefs about human nature, including dishonesty, selfishness, and exploitation of other individuals (Kanter & Mirvis, 1989). Contrarily, negative experiences in organizations frequently evoke attitudinal cynicism (Andersson, 1996; Dean et al., 1998), such as psychological contract breaches (Pfrombeck et al., 2020). As understanding organizational cynicism depends on the perspectives of attitudinal cynicism, this study regarded organizational cynicism as a negative attitude following previous studies.

Skimina et al. (2021) suggested that diversity in personality traits leads to different attitudes. Chiaburu et al. (2013) proposed that employees with different personality traits would produce diverse attributions to realizing expectations, such as promotion or salary increase. As the theory of individual differences emphasizes, an individual's personality and traits play a crucial role in shaping their attitudes (Smidt et al., 2018). Thus, personality traits could be predictors of organizational cynicism. A recent study also discovered that personality traits significantly impacted organizational cynicism (Soomro et al., 2022).

While extensive research was conducted on positive personality traits, such as the Big Five, the impact of dark personality traits on daily work was relatively understudied despite a growing interest among researchers (Paleczek et al., 2018). Dark triad personalities consist of three components, namely narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Early scholars categorized narcissism and psychopathy as personality disorders, although both traits could also be observed in ordinary individuals. Cohen (2016) argued that narcissism and psychopathy are subclinical and antisocial personality traits similar to Machiavellianism. The psychological and behavioral manifestations of subclinical narcissism include attention to self-exaggeration, self-admiration, vanity, dominance, high superiority, arrogance, and rudeness (Michel & Bowling, 2013; Shih et al., 2019). Subclinical psychopathic individuals generally display high impulsivity, low sense of responsibility, lack of empathy, the pursuit of stimulation, and lack of anxiety (Harrison et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Machiavellian individuals frequently lack empathy, manipulation, apathy, selfishness, and calculation (Abell & Brewer, 2014). Summarily, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy exhibit similar traits, such as self-centeredness, low empathy, and high aggression (Jones & Figueredo, 2013).

The impact of a dark triad personality on organizational cynicism requires further investigation. Existing literature suggests that dark triad personalities are frequently associated with immorality or negative work attitudes among employees, such as low organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Ying & Cohen, 2018; Walsh et al., 2020). Although dark triad personality traits are often discussed collectively, they may influence employees' negative reactions through distinct psychological mechanisms (Ying & Cohen, 2018; Li et al., 2020). Specifically, individuals high in Machiavellianism tend to exhibit a strong manipulative tendency and a utilitarian view of relationships, often perceiving the organization merely as an instrument to achieve personal goals (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). They typically lack trust in others and frequently question the organization's legitimacy and sincerity, which may lead them to challenge the organization's moral foundations and fairness in decision-making, triggering negative evaluations and emotional responses toward the organization (Wu et al., 2024). Narcissistic individuals are generally characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance and an excessive need for recognition (Ying & Cohen, 2018). When their expectations for attention or rewards are not met in the workplace, they are likely to develop negative attitudes and dissatisfaction, often attributing such outcomes to perceived organizational injustice (Mathieu, 2013; O'Reilly & Chatman, 2020). This cognitive dissonance may evolve into disparaging evaluations and critical expressions, manifesting as organizational cynicism. In contrast, individuals with high levels of psychopathy often display emotional detachment, a lack of empathy, and moral disengagement. They tend to be insensitive to organizational rules and feedback from others, responding to the organizational environment with hostility and indifference (Harrison et al., 2018). Such individuals may view the organization as an oppressive or meaningless structure, exhibiting detachment from and rejecting organizational goals and values, which can foster a generalized sense of suspicion and cynicism toward the organization (Meng et al., 2022). Relevant hypotheses were proposed as follows:

H1. Narcissism has a direct positive effect on organizational cynicism.

H2. Machiavellianism has a direct positive effect on organizational cynicism.

H3. Psychopathy has a direct positive effect on organizational cynicism.

Psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism

The psychological contract breach, which is considered a negative experience, garners significant attention in the organizational field (Chiaburu et al., 2013). Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) provides a theoretical framework for

understanding employees' responses to psychological contract breaches. Employees would be inclined to respond negatively to the organization and strive for an alternative balance when perceiving deceptions from the company (Andersson, 1996). Abubakar and Arasli (2016) posited that a psychological contract breach could result in feelings of inequity or organizational injustice, which might contribute to organizational cynicism. A corresponding hypothesis was proposed as follows:

H4. The psychological contract breach is positively correlated to organizational cynicism.

The mediation role of psychological contract breach in the relationship between dark triad personalities and organizational cynicism

The perceptions and tacit obligations between employers and employees are embodied in a psychological contract (Cohen, 2015). A psychological contract breach occurs when employees perceive that the organization has not fulfilled commitments. Hence, a psychological contract breach is a naturally subjective experience (Cohen, 2012). Employees' personality traits could also influence personal perceptions of the workplace environment (Anglim et al., 2019), including psychological contract breaches. The trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) offers an alternative viewpoint on the association between personality and attitudes by developing the person-situation interaction model in a workplace (Tett & Burnett, 2003). The theory enables comprehending the impact of situational factors on the association between individual traits and attitudes. Mahmood et al. (2021) highlighted that the connections between dark triad personalities might be more indirect by operating through other organizational factors instead of via direct pathways. Ying and Cohen (2018) and Cohen and Özsoy (2021) also emphasized the importance of situational factors in analyzing dark triad personalities and relevant outcomes, as individuals predisposed to dark triad personalities would exhibit more negative attitudes toward the organization, such as organizational cynicism when perceiving psychological contract breach.

Narcissistic tendencies produce a strong sense of entitlement and excessive bragging, especially when perceiving a psychological contract breach (Li et al., 2020), potentially contributing to higher organizational cynicism. Machiavellians are more emotionally detached to utilize manipulation in attaining personal objectives (Jones & Paulhus, 2011) and less inclined to listen to the organization for the psychological contract breach rationales, which could exacerbate existing passive reactions. Thus, individuals with higher Machiavellian levels would respond more negatively to a psychological contract breach than those with lower levels (Muris et al., 2017). Similarly, individuals who score high on the psychopathy measures may utilize psychological contract breach to rationalize the engaging behavior in high organizational cynicism degrees (Forsyth et al. 2012). Three relevant hypotheses were propounded as follows:

H5. The psychological contract breach mediates the relationship between narcissism and organizational cynicism.

H6. The psychological contract breach mediates the relationship between Machiavellianism and organizational cynicism.

H7. The psychological contract breach mediates the relationship between psychopathy and organizational cynicism.

The moderation role of leader-member exchange quality in the relationship between psychological contract breaches and organizational cynicism

The study of psychological contract breaches has expanded beyond investigating relevant negative effects in recent years. Certain academicians demonstrated that constructive psychological contract breach management could alleviate employees' revengeful attitudes (Tomprou et al., 2015). Furthermore, several moderators influence the relationship between psychological contract breach and corresponding passive outcomes (Zhao et al., 2007), with leader-member exchange quality considered a critical moderator (Doden et al., 2018). According to Graen and Cashman (1995), the leader-member exchange theory dictates that leaders cultivate mutually beneficial exchange relationships with diverse subordinates. The theoretical framework has gained significant traction in recent years after contributing multiple valuable insights to the leadership field. Numerous studies also revealed the positive effects of leader-member exchange quality in organizations, such as fulfilling employees' psychological contracts (Collins, 2010) and improving job satisfaction (Volmer et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, the moderating effect of leader-member exchange quality remains underexplored in empirical research (Li et al., 2018). High leader-member exchange quality typically results in greater rewards and resource allocation when leaders achieve positive relationships with subordinates who receive more psychological and career-related resources and support. Erdogan et al. (2004) also discovered that organizational support could reduce the negative consequences of work experiences.

Additionally, higher leader-member exchange quality levels tend to result in more positive employee attitudes and behaviors (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Because employees in high-quality relationships receive more resources and emotional support from their leaders, they are more likely to give the resources they have, including advice, back to the organization. Therefore, a relevant hypothesis was posited as follows:

H8. leader-member exchange quality moderates the relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism.

Methods

Procedures and participants

The theoretical model (see Fig. 1) was verified through the collected data from a representative survey of employees in star-rated hotels across China. The researcher selected hotels across different star levels and geographic regions to reduce potential bias from organizational heterogeneity. A total of 50 hotels were chosen from major metropolitan areas in Southwest China, including cities such as Chengdu, Chongqing, Kunming, and Guiyang. The sample included hotels ranging from one to five stars. Both domestic and international chain hotels, as well as several independently operated establishments, were included to enhance variability and generalizability. Human resource managers at each hotel were contacted to gain permission for participation, and the drop-off and pick-up method (Lovelock et al., 1976) was used to maximize response rates. Specifically, the researchers provided questionnaires to the human resource managers, who distributed the questionnaires to 15 randomly selected employees in each hotel. Questionnaires were distributed at 3-time points over two months (October and November) to minimize common method bias. Demographic information and dark triad personalities were surveyed at Time-1. At Time 2, employees answered their perception of psychological contract breach and their evaluation of leader-member exchange quality. Organizational cynicism was measured at Time-3.

A total of 750 questionnaires were distributed: 688 questionnaires were collected at Time-1 (91.7%), 604 questionnaires were collected at Time-2 (80.5%), and 545 questionnaires were collected at Time-3 (72.7%). Table 1 depicts respondents' demographic information. The scales employed in the present study were translated into Chinese. Professional bilingual translators utilized a back-translation technique to complete the task. The survey also provided details regarding the study objective and significance. Before administering the survey, all participants were reassured that personal responses would be treated as anonymous and confidential. The questionnaire was designed with concise language to facilitate completion within 20 minutes.

Table 1
The Demographic Information of Respondents
(N = 545)

Category	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	233	42.8
Female	312	57.2
Age		
18 to 25 years old	71	13.0
26 to 35 years old	399	73.2
36 to 45 years old	63	11.6
46 and above	12	2.2
Marital Status		
Single	151	27.7
Married	394	72.3
Organizational Tenure		
2 years and below	121	22.2
3 to 6 years	314	57.6
7 to 10 years	87	16.0
11 years and above	23	4.2

Measures

The current study employed a 5-point Likert scale to measure all constructs, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Dark triad personalities. This study used the dark triad personalities scale developed by Thibault and Kelloway (2020) in the workplace. Six items were available for narcissism, including “Others admire me at work”, four for Machiavellianism, such as “I do not trust others at work”, and six for psychopathy, including “People often say I’m out of control”. In addition, since the study’s respondents were from China, some questions in the super-short dark tetrad scale developed by Meng et al. (2022) in the Chinese context were also selected as supplements. As Holtrop et al. (2014) suggested that more contextualized personality measurements could improve predictive performance. Two items were available for narcissism, such as “I have some exceptional qualities”, two for Machiavellianism, such as “Whatever it takes, I must get the important people on my side”, and two for psychopathy, including “People often say I’m out of control”. Therefore, this study formed 9-item scale for narcissism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.916$), 6-item scale for Machiavellianism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.896$), and 9-item scale for psychopathy (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.926$).

Psychological contract breach. Robinson and Morrison’s (2000) 5-item psychological contract breach scale, such as “I have not received everything promised to me in exchange for my contributions” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.920$) was employed.

Organizational cynicism. The 13-item organizational cynicism scale developed by Brandes et al. (1999) was adopted, including “I believe that my organization says one thing and does another” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.927$).

Leader-member exchange. The 7-item leader-member exchange quality scale was adopted from Graen and Uhlbien (1995), such as “I always know how satisfied my supervisor is with my work” (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.920$).

Control variables. Consistent with previous studies, gender, age, and organizational tenure were selected as control variables (Doden et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018). Firstly, gender impacts negative organizational behavior due to gender differences in work values (Chin & Hung, 2013). Secondly, employees of different ages have different self-regulation abilities, which also affects the attitude of these employees in the organization, especially after experiencing psychological contract breach (Chih et al., 2016). Finally, organizational tenure may pose challenges as employees with longer tenure amass more excellent company-specific knowledge and experience, enabling them to interpret organizational dynamics with less reliance on interpersonal information exchange (Pfrombeck et al., 2020). Therefore, the study measured control variables of gender (1 = male, 2 = female), age (1 = 18–25, 2 = 26–35, 3 = 36–45, 4 = 46 and above), and organizational tenure (1 = 2 years and below, 2 = 3–6 years, 3 = 7–10 years, 4 = 11 years and above).

Results

Measurement model

The study results suggested that the proposed model achieved a good fit for the data. The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) produced satisfactory fit indices ($\chi^2 = 962.662$, $df = 671$, $\chi^2 / df = 1.435$, TLI = 0.976, CFI = 0.979, SRMR = 0.036, RMSEA = 0.028). All standardized loads of the items exceeded 0.6 with significant values ($p < 0.001$), as portrayed in Table 2. Compared to alternative models (see Table 3), the proposed model demonstrated superior model fit by effectively differentiating between narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, psychological contract breach, leader-member exchange quality, and organizational cynicism. Hair et al. (2017) suggested that the proposed model with higher TFI and CFI values, lower RMSEA value, and statistically significant Chi-square ($\Delta\chi^2$) changes indicated higher model fit and parsimony. Table 2 also illustrates that all combination reliability (CR) values are above 0.8, thus indicating acceptable values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In addition, Table 2 displays that all average variances extracted (AVE) values exceed 0.5, which indicates satisfactory convergent validity. The square root of AVEs was also higher than the correlation coefficients between variables (see Table 4), which suggested sufficient discriminant validity. Summarily, the six-factor model proposed in the present study exhibits relatively high convergence and discriminant validity.

Table 2
Factor Loading, Cronbach's Alphas, AVE, and CR Values

Variable	Item	Loading	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR
Narcissism	Nar1	0.840	0.917	0.561	0.919
	Nar2	0.760			
	Nar3	0.732			
	Nar4	0.771			
	Nar5	0.824			
	Nar6	0.654			
	Nar7	0.630			
	Nar8	0.798			
	Nar9	0.702			
Machiavellianism	Mac1	0.779	0.896	0.576	0.890
	Mac2	0.693			
	Mac3	0.816			
	Mac4	0.824			
	Mac5	0.793			
	Mac6	0.629			
Psychopathy	Psy1	0.816	0.924	0.579	0.925
	Psy2	0.702			
	Psy3	0.807			
	Psy4	0.748			
	Psy5	0.749			
	Psy6	0.762			
	Psy7	0.782			
	Psy8	0.686			
	Psy9	0.784			
Psychological Contract Breach	PCB1	0.822	0.920	0.684	0.915
	PCB2	0.900			
	PCB3	0.845			
	PCB4	0.802			
	PCB5	0.760			
Organizational Cynicism	OC1	0.829	0.927	0.622	0.955
	OC2	0.835			
	OC3	0.799			
Note: All loadings were significant at the 0.001 level.					

Variable	Item	Loading	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR
	OC4	0.769	0.920	0.620	0.919
	OC5	0.768			
	OC6	0.889			
	OC7	0.886			
	OC8	0.658			
	OC9	0.738			
	OC10	0.795			
	OC11	0.667			
	OC12	0.832			
	OC13	0.746			
Leader-Member Exchange	LMX1	0.829	0.920	0.620	0.919
	LMX2	0.835			
	LMX3	0.721			
	LMX4	0.784			
	LMX5	0.829			
	LMX6	0.776			
	LMX7	0.730			
Note: All loadings were significant at the 0.001 level.					

Table 3
Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results of Each Factor

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	TLI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$
Proposed Model^a	962.662	671	1.435	0.976	0.979	0.036	0.028	-
Proposed Model^b	817.561	632	1.294	0.984	0.986	0.027	0.023	145.101***
5-Factor Model	2695.141	676	3.987	0.838	0.853	0.097	0.074	1732.479***
4-Factor Model	3488.881	679	5.138	0.776	0.795	0.109	0.087	2526.219***
3-Factor Model	4515.466	681	6.626	0.695	0.720	0.115	0.102	3552.804***
2-Factor Model	4601.973	683	6.738	0.689	0.714	0.116	0.103	3639.311***
1-Factor Model	6382.986	684	9.332	0.556	0.584	0.147	0.124	5420.324***

Notes: ^a Proposed model = without unmeasured latent method construct; ^b Proposed model = with unmeasured latent method; 5-Factor model (Narcissism + Machiavellianism); 4-Factor Model (Narcissism + Machiavellianism + Psychopathy); 3-Factor Model (Narcissism + Machiavellianism + Psychopathy + psychological contract breach); 2-Factor Model (Narcissism + Machiavellianism + Psychopathy + psychological contract breach + organizational cynicism); *** significant at the 0.001 level.

Table 4
Correlations, Means, SDs, And Square Root of AVEs

Gender	Mean	SD	Gender	Age	Tenure	NAR	MAC	PSY	PCB	OC	LMX
	-	0.495	1								
Age	2.029	0.578	0.005	1							
Tenure	2.022	0.742	-0.069	0.286**	1						
NAR	2.990	0.913	-0.022	-0.006	-0.169**	0.747					
MAC	2.600	0.838	0.019	0.040	-0.322**	0.280**	0.759				
PSY	2.093	0.772	-0.061	-0.044	-0.272**	0.219**	0.596**	0.762			
PCB	2.448	0.912	-0.031	-0.022	-0.382**	0.264**	0.499**	0.473**	0.827		
OC	2.399	0.834	-0.027	0.025	-0.385**	0.309**	0.635**	0.599**	0.710**	0.789	
LMX	3.343	0.870	0.067	0.025	0.056	-0.032	-0.157**	-0.121**	-0.148**	-0.221**	0.787

Notes: N = 545; Square roots of the AVE for each variable are displayed on the diagonal; ** significant at the 0.01 level; NAR = Narcissism; MAC = Machiavellianism; PSY = Psychopathy; PCB = psychological contract breach; OC = organizational cynicism; LMX = leader-member exchange

Common method bias

This study tested the common method bias by creating an unmeasured latent method factor, whereby all items were linked to the unmeasured latent method factor. The correlation between the unmeasured latent method factor and the latent variable was set to zero, as suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Fit indices for the unmeasured latent method factor are reported in Table 3. The chi-square ($\Delta\chi^2 = 145.101, p < 0.001$) change was revealed to be statistically significant, with the difference between CFI, SRMR, and RMSEA under 0.1. Based on Bagozzi's and Yi's (1990) suggestion, no common method bias existed in the present study.

Hypothesis testing

Table 5 portrays the regression analysis results. Specifically, the relationship between narcissism and organizational cynicism ($\beta = 0.067, p < 0.05$) was significant, thus supporting H1. Moreover, a significant positive relationship was discovered between Machiavellianism and organizational cynicism ($\beta = 0.259, p < 0.001$), which supported H2. Similarly, a significant positive relationship between psychopathy and organizational cynicism ($\beta = 0.221, p < 0.001$), which supported H3. Furthermore, the findings revealed a significant positive correlation between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism ($\beta = 0.467, p < 0.001$) and supported H4.

Table 5
Regression Analysis Results

Variable	Organizational Cynicism					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	
Gender	-0.029	0.050	-0.011	0.045	-0.004	0.044
Age	0.079*	0.045	0.062*	0.040	0.066*	0.039
Tenure	-0.184***	0.038	-0.067*	0.035	-0.070*	0.034
Narcissism	0.130***	0.032	0.071*	0.028	0.067*	0.028
Machiavellianism	0.415***	0.073	0.267***	0.064	0.259***	0.062
Psychopathy	0.337***	0.047	0.227***	0.042	0.221***	0.041
PCB			0.496***	0.042	0.467***	0.041
LMX					-0.096***	0.027
PCB* LMX					-0.061*	0.023
R ²	0.658		0.802			0.811

Notes: N = 545; * significant at the 0.05 level; ** significant at the 0.01 level; *** significant at the 0.001 level.

The current study performed 5,000-sample bootstrapping with bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) set at 95%. Table 6 depicts the results of the direct and indirect effects. An insignificant relationship was demonstrated between narcissism and organizational cynicism in terms of the direct ($\beta = 0.067, p < 0.05$, 95% CI [0.010, 0.127]) and indirect effects ($\beta = 0.055, p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.019, 0.098]), thus supported H5. Meanwhile, the direct effect ($\beta = 0.259, p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.142, 0.368]) and the indirect effect ($\beta = 0.139, p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.074, 0.206]) of Machiavellianism on organizational cynicism mediated by psychological contract breach were significant. The findings posited that the psychological contract breach mediated the influence of Machiavellianism on organizational cynicism, which supported H6. Concurrently, the results discovered significant direct ($\beta = 0.221, p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.118, 0.320]) and indirect relationships ($\beta = 0.110, p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.052, 0.177]) between psychopathy and organizational cynicism mediated by psychological contract breach. Thus, psychological contract breach mediated the association between psychopathy and organizational cynicism, which supported H7. Table 5 also displays the statistically significant relationship between interaction term of psychological contract breach and leader-member exchange quality and organizational cynicism ($\beta = -0.061, p < 0.05$), hence supporting H8. Meanwhile, the moderating effect was measured by examining the simple slope (± 1 SD) at low and high leader-member exchange quality levels. Figure 2 illustrates that the slope of low leader-member exchange quality ($\beta = 0.530, p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.422, 0.628]) is higher than that of high leader-member exchange quality ($\beta = 0.423, p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.314, 0.528]). As such, high leader-member exchange quality significantly buffered the impact of psychological contract breach on organizational cynicism.

Table 6
Mediation Test Results

Relationship	Direct Effect		Bias-corrected 95%CI		Indirect Effect		Bias-corrected 95%CI	
	β	SE	Lower	Upper	β	SE	Lower	Upper
NAR → PCB → OC	0.067*	0.030	0.010	0.127	0.055***	0.020	0.019	0.098
MAC → PCB → OC	0.259***	0.056	0.142	0.368	0.139***	0.034	0.074	0.206
PSY → PCB → OC	0.221***	0.051	0.118	0.320	0.110***	0.032	0.052	0.177
Notes: N = 545; * significant at the 0.05 level; ** significant at the 0.01 level; *** significant at the 0.001 level.								

Discussions

The current study confirmed that dark triad personalities significantly positively impact organizational cynicism. This finding is consistent with previous studies that emphasized the negative consequences of dark triad traits in workplace settings (e.g., Yan et al., 2024; Khalid et al., 2024; Joshi et al., 2024). Secondly, the study further verifies the role of psychological contract breach as a situational factor. It activates the negative cognitive and emotional responses of individuals with dark triad traits, ultimately leading to cynical attitudes toward the organization (Ying & Cohen, 2018). This finding aligns with trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), which posits that personality traits manifest in specific attitudes or behaviors only when activated by relevant situational cues. Finally, the study found that leader-member exchange quality was a buffering factor in the relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism. This result is consistent with prior research (Dulac et al., 2008; Griep et al., 2016; Li et al., 2018), demonstrating that high-quality LMX relationships could mitigate the negative outcomes of perceived breach. As Morrison and Robinson (1997) noted, LMX relationships based on trust and mutual respect foster continuous and open communication between supervisors and subordinates, which in turn helps reduce the emotional impact of psychological contract breaches.

Theoretical implications

The current study generated several theoretical implications for the existing literature. Particularly, this study verified the dark triad personalities impacts on organizational cynicism and bridged the existing gaps in the current dark triad personalities literature. Although prior research has established that dark triad personalities are linked to negative work attitudes such as low job satisfaction (Walsh et al., 2020), their specific influence on organizational cynicism, particularly as a multidimensional construct reflecting cognitive, emotional, and behavioral disaffection, has remained underexplored, especially in service-intensive sectors like hospitality. Simultaneously, the present study verified the negative outcome of narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy on organizations. Notably, narcissism had the most minor correlation with organizational cynicism compared to psychopathy and Machiavellianism. As Grijalva and Newman (2015) suggested, Western individualistic culture would promote more passive effects for narcissists compared to collectivistic cultures. Ma et al. (2021) also demonstrated that narcissism would be more prevalent in individualistic culture than in collectivistic culture, which emphasizes interpersonal focus instead of self-focus.

In addition, this study enhanced the understanding of trait activation theory by investigating psychological contract breach as a mediator and appraising situational factors. Ying and Cohen (2018) asserted that situational factors are necessary when analyzing dark triad personalities. Building on this premise, the present study provides empirical support for the mediating role of psychological contract breach in the relationship between narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy and organizational cynicism and fills the gap in the current literature. These findings demonstrate that dark personality traits do not directly produce negative attitudes in a vacuum; instead, their effects become salient when employees perceive a psychological contract breach. It suggests that employees' attitudes toward their organizations are shaped by how personal

traits are activated in response to specific workplace experiences. Consequently, this study extends trait activation theory by showing that even stable personality traits, such as those within the dark triad, can have context-dependent outcomes.

The current study assessed the moderating role of leader-member exchange quality on the relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism. Specifically, high leader-member exchange buffered the positive impact of psychological contract breach more on organizational cynicism than low leader-member exchange quality. Conversely, Pfrombeck et al. (2020) revealed that high leader-member exchange quality significantly increased the positive impact of psychological contract breach on organizational cynicism. Similar conflict also exists in other studies. Certain scholars discovered that higher leader-member exchange quality could mitigate the positive effect of psychological contract breach on the violation (Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson & Wayne, 2008). Scholars who argued that higher leader-member exchange quality could amplify the negative effect of psychological contract breach posited that employees with high leader-member exchange quality tend to perceive a greater sense of treachery following the PB (Suazo, 2011; Pfrombeck et al., 2020). Contrastingly, researchers propounded that high leader-member exchange quality could provide employees with additional resources, thus reducing the imbalance engendered by the breach (Dulac et al., 2008; Griep et al., 2016; Li et al., 2018). Doden et al. (2018) addressed the contradictory findings by proposing employees' career orientation to elucidate the phenomenon. The current finding contributes to this debate by providing empirical support for the buffering perspective, thereby challenging prior assumptions that high-quality leader-member exchange universally intensifies the perception of the breach (e.g., Pfrombeck et al., 2020). In the context of Chinese hotel employees, our results suggest that high-quality leader-member exchange may alleviate the negative influence of psychological contract breaches on organizational cynicism.

Managerial implications

Based on the findings, several practical implications can be derived to assist hotel managers in addressing organizational cynicism among employees. Firstly, our results confirmed that narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy significantly and positively predict organizational cynicism. Therefore, hotel human resource departments should consider incorporating personality assessments during recruitment (Wu et al., 2024). For example, validated personality screening tools may help identify high-risk individuals and reduce the likelihood of hiring candidates with cynical workplace attitudes. However, hotel leaders need to be aware that there may be moral or legal issues related to privacy when conducting personality assessments.

Furthermore, the study results indicate that employees with dark triad personalities exhibit increased organizational cynicism when exposed to adverse encounters, specifically psychological contract breach experiences among employees. Secondly, the study revealed that psychological contract breach significantly mediates the relationship between dark triad personalities and organizational cynicism. To mitigate this effect, hotel managers should prioritize building a psychologically safe work environment. For instance, training in moral ethics and values could effectively mitigate the negative impact of dark triad personalities (Li et al., 2020). Nevertheless, moral training initiatives may require additional time, funds, and management resources. Managers can also prevent psychological contract breaches through transparent communication and vigilance toward employees.

Thirdly, the results show that leader-member exchange quality is a buffer in the relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism. Therefore, managers are advised to establish and foster positive exchange relationships with subordinates. It may involve cultivating trust, supporting subordinates, enhancing their potential, and resolving job-related challenges. Additionally, sustained communication efforts could enhance the working relationship, ultimately establishing a high-quality leader-member exchange.

Limitations and future research directions

The present study encountered several limitations. Firstly, the sample of this study focuses on the hotel industry in China. Including a larger sample size and a broader cultural and industrial diversity range must be considered limitations in this study. Similar studies could be conducted in different countries or industries to obtain more general results, as the current research topic was limitedly investigated. Secondly, the causality of this study is still inconclusive. Future studies could

conduct longitudinal studies or experiments to determine causality further. Thirdly, this study relied on a composite score of organizational cynicism without distinguishing its cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Dean et al., 1998). This approach may have diluted the observed relationships between variables, particularly in the moderation analysis (Pfrombeck et al., 2020). For example, the relatively small difference in slopes found in the moderating effect of leader-member exchange quality may be partly due to this aggregation. The buffering effect of leader-member exchange quality may be more salient for specific dimensions, such as affective cynicism, than for others. Future studies should examine each dimension separately to provide a more refined understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Finally, the current research on dark triad personalities and psychological contract breach is still in infancy. Potential studies could verify more situational factors, such as organizational justice, organizational commitment, and organizational politics, to fill the current literature gaps.

Conclusion

In summary, this study draws the following conclusions: Firstly, this study found that dark triad personalities were positively correlated with organizational cynicism. This finding validated the individual difference theory and further suggested that dark triad personalities are associated with employees' negative attitudes. Secondly, another interesting finding suggested that psychological contract breach mediated dark triad personalities influence organizational cynicism, implying that personality traits affect employees' perceptions. In addition, this finding also suggested that situational factors must be considered when studying the influence of personality because the influence of personality on results is often indirect. Finally, this study found that in Chinese hotel organizations, good leader-member exchange quality helps buffer the influence of psychological contract breach on organizational cynicism. This finding highlights the need for leaders in hospitality organizations to value relationships with subordinates, as when the relationship between employees and leaders is good, employees are more inclined to handle psychological contract breach gently, and in turn, low-quality leader-member exchange can lead employees to adopt tit-for-tat tactics when finding psychological contract breach.

Declarations

Competing interests:

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval:

This study was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of Liupanshui Normal University, where the research was conducted, and was granted an exemption from formal ethical approval in accordance with the institution's ethical policy (LPSSYKYJJ202517). The exemption was granted in March 2025 because the study involved anonymous and voluntary survey responses from adult participants and did not involve medical procedures, sensitive personal data, or biological materials. Thus, no separate ethical approval was required from another local or external ethics committee. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments, as well as applicable institutional and national ethical standards.

Informed consent:

Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study at the beginning of the survey. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the data collection and analysis process.

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Author Contribution

H.W. developed the conceptual idea. H.W. collected data and did the analysis under the supervision of A.S. wrote the manuscript. A.S. and S.R. provided critical feedback.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Figures

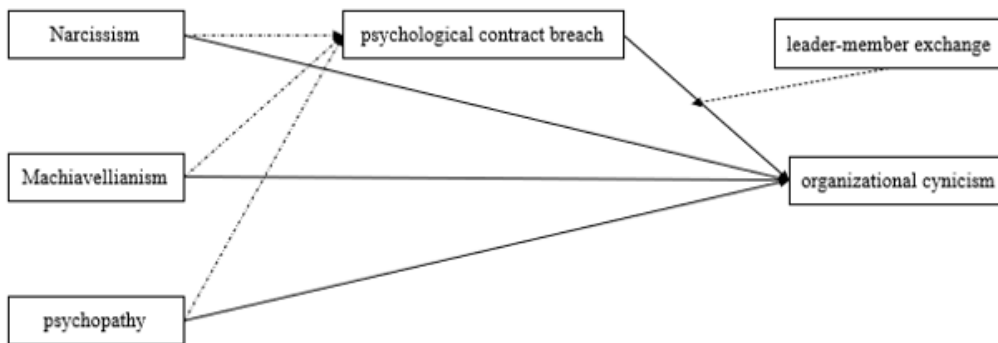


Figure 1

The Proposed Theoretical Model

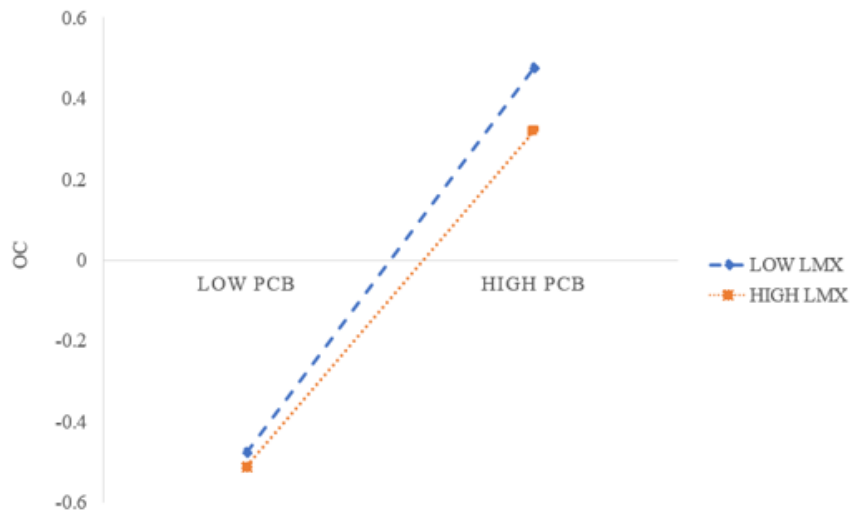


Figure 2

The Moderating Effect of leader-member exchange Quality on the Relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism

Supplementary Files

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- [finaldata.xlsx](#)
- [SurveyQuestionnaireEnglish.docx](#)