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The Impact of Toxic Leadership on Counterproductive Work Behavior: The Mediating Role of Workplace Ostracism and the Moderating Role of Coping Humor

Marwa Tahir[1]*, Dr. Mehreen Fatima[2], Dr. Asif Niaz[3]

[1]*Lahore Business School, The University of Lahore, Email: Marwatahir18@gamil.com*
[2]*Lahore Business School, The University of Lahore, Email: mehreen.fatima@lbs.uol.edu.pk*
[3]*Lahore Business School, The University of Lahore, Email: asif.niaz@lbs.uol.edu.pk*

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Corresponding Author:
Marwa Tahir
Email:
Marwatahir18@gamil.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how toxic leadership shapes counterproductive work behavior (CWB) through workplace ostracism and whether employees' coping humor weakens that pathway. Using a cross-sectional survey of N = 250 employees from multiple private organizations and analyzing the data with PLS-SEM, we find: (1) toxic leadership strongly predicts workplace ostracism; (2) ostracism, in turn, predicts CWB; (3) ostracism mediates the link between toxic leadership and CWB; and (4) coping humor moderates the ostracism → CWB path, such that higher humor relates to lower CWB under ostracism. Reliability and validity thresholds were met (α and CR ≥ 0.87; AVE ≥ 0.62). The model explains substantial variance in ostracism (R^2 = 0.652) and CWB (R^2 = 0.787). Results suggest organizations should curb toxic leadership, monitor social exclusion, and cultivate adaptive humor to protect well-being and performance.

Introduction

Leadership is one of the most important parts of an organisation. A good leader can improve employee satisfaction, teamwork, and overall performance. Positive leadership makes employees feel supported and motivated, which helps them to stay committed to their organisation (Bligh, Budworth and Mainemelis, 2000; Azmy et al., 2023). However, leadership is not always positive. Sometimes leaders behave in negative or harmful ways. This type of leadership is often called toxic leadership, and it can create many problems for both employees and organisations (Tepper, 2000; Ahmed et al., 2024).Toxic leadership means using fear, control, and manipulation instead of fairness and respect. It is connected to ideas like abusive supervision, destructive leadership, and

exploitative leadership (Schyns and Hansbrough, 2010; Schmid et al., 2019). Employees who work under such leaders may feel stressed, tired, and unhappy with their jobs (Harvey et al., 2007). They may also leave the organisation or show behaviours that reduce productivity, such as arriving late, refusing to cooperate, or even damaging work processes (Zellars et al., 2002; Tepper et al., 2006). These harmful leadership styles affect not only the workers but also the organisation's success in the long run (Aryee et al., 2007).Work place ostracism is one of the key ways in which toxic leadership influences employees. Ostracism refers to being neglected, avoided or like one does not exist. It is not as visible as bullying, but it is also equally harmful (Robinson, O'Reilly and Wang, 2013). Ostracised employees are likely to feel lonely and isolated. It has been found that the result of ostracism is emotional exhaustion, depression and the loss of organisational commitment (Howard, Cogswell and Smith, 2020). Toxic leaders can promote such a behaviour by building the environment in which exclusion and unfair treatment represent the norm (Zhang and Bednall, 2016).Emotions do not mean the end of the impacts of ostracism at work. They also have the potential of causing counterproductive work behaviour (CWB). Some of the actions that are incorporated in CWB are wasting of time, rumour-mongering, stealing, or refusal of working in a proper manner. Such kinds of behaviours are detrimental to employees and organisations (Marcus et al., 2016). Feeling ignored or treated unfairly will often lead to frustration or anger on the part of employees, which can lead to CWB (Li, Xu and Kwan, 2021). Research has revealed that ostracism is a notable connection between toxic leadership and adverse behaviours at the work place (Anjum et al., 2022; Ahmed et al., 2024).Toxic leadership and ostracism do present severe issues but on the other hand, there are manners in which employees can handle these challenges. Coping humor is one of these coping strategies. Coping humor refers to the use of the light jokes or jibes as a way of coping with stress. Humor can also help employees be less affected by rejection or negative treatment when they apply it (Fredrickson, 2001). In case of a situation where an employee is shunned by his or her colleagues, humor can help the individual to eliminate the emotional pain and self-esteem. Research indicates that humor is able to shield an individual against burnout and assist them to stay robust under challenging circumstances (Simione and Gnagnarella, 2023). Neves (2018) also discovered that humor has the power to neutralise negative emotions that arise when one feels like an outsider at work. By doing so humor is a positive psychological factor that can be used to enhance resilience of employees.

This research focuses on the connections between toxic leadership, workplace ostracism, CWB, and coping humor. It suggests that toxic leadership increases ostracism, and ostracism then increases CWB. At the same time, coping humor may reduce the impact of ostracism on CWB. This means that employees who use humor are less likely to show harmful behaviours even when they face exclusion. The study therefore presents a moderated mediation model, where ostracism is a mediator between toxic leadership and CWB, and coping humor is a moderator that reduces the negative effects.The research problem is that many past studies have looked at toxic leadership and its direct effects on employees, but only a few have studied how ostracism explains the connection between toxic leadership and CWB (Kayani and Jabeen, 2021). Even fewer studies have considered how humor can change this process. Without this understanding, it is difficult for organisations to know how to reduce the damage caused by toxic leaders.The aim of this study is to examine how toxic leadership influences counterproductive work behaviour through workplace ostracism, and how coping humour moderates this process. The objectives are: (1) to analyse the relationship between toxic leadership and workplace ostracism; (2) to investigate the mediating role of ostracism between toxic leadership and CWB; (3) to evaluate the moderating role of coping humor between ostracism and CWB; and (4) to explore the indirect role of coping humor in the toxic leadership–CWB relationship.The research questions are: (1) How does toxic leadership influence ostracism? (2) How does ostracism mediate the link between toxic leadership and CWB? (3) How does coping humor moderate the link between ostracism and CWB? and (4) How does

coping humor influence the indirect relationship between toxic leadership and CWB?This study is important for theory, practice, and policy. Theoretically, it adds to leadership and organisational behaviour literature by combining toxic leadership, ostracism, CWB, and coping humor in one model. It builds on Social Exchange Theory, which explains how broken trust leads to retaliation (Robinson, O'Reilly and Wang, 2013). It also uses Conservation of Resources Theory, which explains how exclusion drains emotional energy (Hobfoll, 1989), and the Broaden-and-Build Theory, which explains how humor builds resilience and positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001).Practically, the study will help managers and HR professionals to recognise toxic leadership and reduce its effects. Leaders can be trained in emotional intelligence, fairness, and inclusion. Employees can be encouraged to use positive coping strategies like humor to manage stress.From a policy view, organisations can design rules and programmes to prevent toxic leadership and workplace ostracism and also promote well-being initiatives. For example, training sessions on humor and resilience can be included in employee development. This will improve satisfaction, reduce turnover, and create healthier workplaces (Sharma and Dhar, 2024).In conclusion, leadership is a powerful factor in organisations. Positive leadership improves motivation and performance, but toxic leadership creates exclusion and negative behaviours. By studying toxic leadership, ostracism, and coping humor, this research provides both academic and practical solutions for healthier workplaces.

Literature Review

Toxic leadership is a destructive style of leadership where leaders act in ways that harm their subordinates and damage the organisation. Lipman-Blumen (2005) described it as a form of leadership based on arrogance, manipulation, and self-interest. Toxic leaders often use threats, intimidation, and pressure to control others, instead of motivating them positively. Tepper (2000) focused on abusive supervision, which is a form of toxic leadership, and found that employees under such leaders experience emotional exhaustion and workplace deviance.Toxic leadership is not restricted to one industry or culture. Bhandarker and Rai (2019) argued that competitive organisations, where there is pressure to deliver short-term gains, create conditions where toxic leaders thrive. Ahmed et al. (2024) showed that it is common in high-stress sectors like healthcare and finance, where leaders often prioritise productivity over employee well-being.The consequences of toxic leadership are serious for both individuals and organisations. Employees often experience stress, burnout, low job satisfaction, and high turnover intentions (Nunes and Palma-Moreira, 2024). They may also lose trust in management and feel excluded. At the organisational level, toxic leadership reduces productivity and increases negative behaviours among employees. Tiwari and Jha (2022) showed that toxic leaders create workplace injustice, which leads employees to retaliate with deviant behaviours. Ahmed et al. (2024) also explained that toxic leadership creates organisational cynicism, where employees lose confidence in their organisation.

Counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) is one of the main outcomes of toxic leadership. CWB refers to intentional acts that harm the organisation or its members (Robinson and Bennett, 1995). Examples include theft, absenteeism, gossip, sabotage, and aggression (Marcus et al., 2016; Carpenter, Whitman and Amrhein, 2021). Employees often engage in CWB as a reaction to unfairness or mistreatment. Research shows a strong positive link between toxic leadership and CWB (Tiwari and Jha, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2024). Emotional exhaustion, injustice, and broken trust are some of the mechanisms that explain this relationship (Kayani and Jabeen, 2021).

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Toxic leadership is positively associated with counterproductive work behaviour.

Workplace ostracism is a subtle but powerful form of mistreatment. Robinson, O'Reilly and Wang (2013) defined it as being ignored or excluded at work. Unlike bullying, ostracism is often hidden, but it can be equally harmful (Liu and Xia, 2016). Employees who experience ostracism report feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and stress (Mao et al., 2018; Howard, Cogswell and Smith, 2020).From an organisational view, ostracism lowers employee engagement and performance. It can also increase turnover (Anjum et al., 2022). According to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, ostracism drains important resources such as energy, confidence, and social support, leaving employees vulnerable to negative behaviours (Hobfoll, 1989; Howard, Cogswell and Smith, 2020).Toxic leaders often encourage ostracism, directly or indirectly. Chen and Sun (2021) found that toxic leaders use exclusion to maintain control over teams. Kanwal, Lodhi and Kashif (2019) also showed that authoritarian leaders create bias and division, leading to ostracism. Jahanzeb and Fatima (2018) argued that abusive supervision increases silence and isolation among employees, while Gkorezis and Bellou (2016) observed that victims of toxic leadership sometimes withdraw voluntarily, which worsens the exclusion.Ostracism also increases the risk of CWB. Employees who feel rejected or invisible often react with withdrawal, absenteeism, sabotage, or aggression to show protest or regain control (Mao et al., 2018). Li, Xu and Kwan (2021) found that ostracism reduces self-esteem, which increases the likelihood of deviant behaviour. Liu et al. (2024) also observed that ostracised employees are more likely to engage in CWB because exclusion creates feelings of injustice.Several studies confirm that ostracism acts as a bridge between toxic leadership and negative outcomes. Liu and Xia (2016) showed that ostracism fully mediates the link between abusive supervision and deviant behaviour. Anjum et al. (2022) found that ostracism explains how toxic leadership leads to lower work effort. In this way, ostracism is a critical mediator in the toxic leadership–CWB relationship.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between toxic leadership and counterproductive work behaviour.

Coping humor is the use of humor to deal with stress and negative experiences. Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build Theory explains that positive emotions, such as humor, expand thinking and help people build psychological resources. Humor is different from avoidance coping because it is active and reframes negative events in a lighter way, reducing stress and improving well-being (Simione and Gnagnarella, 2023). It can also strengthen group relationships by reducing tension (Di Giuseppe et al., 2024).Humor can help employees deal with ostracism. Neves (2018) showed that humor reduces the negative meaning of exclusion, so employees feel less rejected. Gockel (2021) found that humor helps people maintain belonging even in stressful conditions. Sharma and Dhar (2024) also argued that humour reduces the psychological damage of social exclusion.Humor is also linked to lower levels of CWB. Cheng et al. (2021) explained that humor blocks the frustration–aggression pathway, which means employees are less likely to respond to exclusion with aggression or sabotage. Zhang et al. (2022) showed that employees who use humor are less likely to engage in retaliatory behaviours, while Mohammad and Khassawneh (2022) found that humor increases positive affect and reduces deviance.Studies confirm that coping humour acts as a moderator. Trif and Fodor (2019) found that employees with high humor coping styles had lower emotional exhaustion and less CWB. Simione and Gnagnarella (2023) showed that humor weakens the link between stress and negative outcomes. Cheng et al. (2021) also demonstrated that humor moderates the link between work–life conflict and job performance. Together, this evidence shows humor can buffer the negative effects of ostracism on behaviour.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Coping humor moderates the relationship between workplace ostracism and counterproductive work behaviour.

The proposed study combines mediation and moderation into one model. In this model, toxic leadership increases ostracism, ostracism increases CWB, and coping humor moderates the ostracism–CWB link. This means the indirect effect of toxic leadership on CWB through ostracism depends on the level of humor. Employees with high humor are less likely to turn exclusion into deviant behaviour, so the overall indirect effect is weaker.This framework fits well with theory. Social Exchange Theory shows how toxic leadership breaks trust and reciprocity, creating exclusion (Robinson, O'Reilly and Wang, 2013). COR theory explains how ostracism drains resources, leading to deviance (Hobfoll, 1989). Broaden-and-Build Theory explains how humor creates positive emotions that interrupt this chain and protect employees (Fredrickson, 2001).Research supports this moderated mediation. Simione and Gnagnarella (2023) found that humor reduces the stress of avoidance coping. Zhang and Haslam (2013) showed that humor lessens retaliatory behavior under abusive supervision. Cheng et al. (2021) also found humor moderates workplace stress effects. These findings support the idea that humor can reduce the indirect pathway from toxic leadership to CWB.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Coping humour moderates the indirect relationship between toxic leadership and CWB through workplace ostracism.

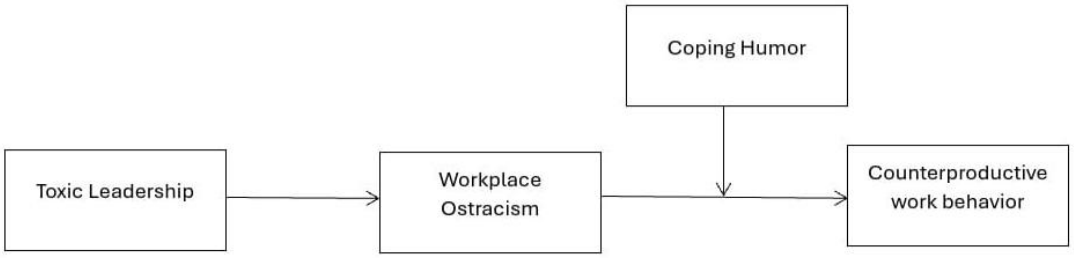


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study tested the research model in private organisations in Pakistan. The target population was employees working in different support roles. These workers were chosen because they often deal with supervisors daily and are likely to experience both positive and toxic leadership behaviours.A total of 250 employees were invited to take part in the survey. This number was chosen because it is large enough to give reliable results in structural equation modelling (Hair et al., 2018). Out of these, the majority completed the survey, giving a response rate above 70%. This response rate is considered good for survey-based research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016).The research employed a quantitative research approach. This implies that it concentrated on figures and data instead of interviews and anecdotes. The cross-sectional design was used, and it presupposes gathering all the data at a single time. This is convenient since it enables the research to test cause-effect relationships in a practical and economical manner (Creswell, 2014).A structured questionnaire was the instrument of data collection. Google Forms were used to distribute the survey online. All subjects were given a message containing the survey link and consent form. The form clarified the aim of the study, the right to withdraw whenever they liked and the assurance of confidentiality. The questionnaire had all of the items measured through a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. Such a scale is also easy to complete by the respondents, and the choices are balanced (Joshi et al., 2015). Demographic data including gender, age, education, and work experience were also obtained in the

survey. The majority of interviewed subjects were aged between 20 and 35 years old, with an undergraduate or post-graduate degree, and were junior or middle-level employees. The larger part of the sample was composed of female employees.

The study employed a questionnaire that comprised of validated scales in the previous studies. The reason behind the use of these scales is that they are reliable and have wide acceptance. The questions were all in English, which is commonly spoken in the workplace in Pakistan, and the respondents could clearly understand it. Toxic leadership was measured using the Abusive Supervision Scale developed by Tepper (2000). This scale includes questions such as "My supervisor puts me down in front of others" and "My supervisor tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid." These items capture negative behaviours from leaders that make employees feel belittled or ignored. Previous studies have shown that this scale has strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.80 (Tepper, 2000).Workplace ostracism was measured using the Workplace Ostracism Scale by Ferris et al. (2008). This scale includes items such as "Others ignored you at work" and "Others left the area when you entered." The scale captures subtle forms of exclusion and isolation that may not be openly visible but are damaging for employees. Earlier studies have reported high reliability for this scale, with alpha values above 0.85.Coping humour was measured with the Coping Humor Scale developed by Martin and Lefcourt (1983). This scale measures how often employees use humour to deal with stress. Example items include "I often lose my sense of humour when I am having problems" (reverse coded) and "I have often found that my problems have been greatly reduced when I try to find something funny in them." This scale has been used in many studies on stress and coping, with Cronbach's alpha usually above 0.70.Counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) was measured using the CWB Checklist developed by Spector et al. (2010). This checklist measures behaviours that harm organisations or colleagues. Items include "Purposely wasted your employer's materials/supplies" and "Came to work late without permission." The scale covers both organisational deviance (e.g., theft, sabotage) and interpersonal deviance (e.g., aggression, gossip). It has been shown to be reliable, with alpha coefficients above 0.75.The data collected were analysed in two stages: descriptive statistics and statistical modelling. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise demographics such as age, gender, and education, and to give an overview of responses to each variable.For hypothesis testing, the study used Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. This method was chosen because it is suitable for testing complex models that include both mediating and moderating variables. PLS-SEM also works well with relatively small to medium sample sizes and does not require data to follow a normal distribution (Hair et al., 2018).Some analyses carried out were: Direct analysis, toxic leadership on workplace ostracism, toxic leadership on CWB, and ostracism on CWB. Mediation analysis, testing whether workplace ostracism explains the link between toxic leadership and CWB. Moderation analysis**,** testing whether coping humor weakens the effect of ostracism on CWB. Moderated mediation: testing whether coping humor changes the indirect relationship between toxic leadership and CWB through ostracism. The strength of the paths was tested using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples. This gave confidence intervals and significance values. Reliability and validity were tested through Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE). Discriminant validity was checked using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

This study followed all ethical research guidelines. Each participant received an informed consent form before starting the survey. The form explained the aim of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the guarantee of anonymity. No names or personal identifiers were collected.The data were stored securely and only used for academic purposes. The research also followed the ethical approval of the institutional review board, ensuring that participants' rights were respected (Israel and Hay, 2006).

Results

This chapter explains the results of the study. Data from 250 participants were analysed using PLS-SEM. This method has two steps. The first step is the measurement model, which checks whether the data is valid and reliable. The second step is the structural model, which tests the relationships between variables.In the measurement model, Cronbach's Alpha (α) and Composite Reliability (CR) are used to test reliability. If both values are above 0.70, the data is reliable. Validity is checked in two ways. Convergent validity is confirmed when Average Variance Extracted (AVE) > 0.50 and factor loadings > 0.70. Discriminant validity is confirmed when the square root of AVE is higher than the correlations with other variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Summary of Measurement Model

The first step of the analysis was to check the measurement model. Results showed that all constructs had acceptable reliability and validity.

Table 4.1: Reliability and Validity

Variable / Construct	α	CR	AVE
Coping Humor (CH)	0.878	0.908	0.623
Counterproductive Work Behaviour (CWB)	0.943	0.952	0.714
Toxic Leadership (TL)	0.984	0.985	0.695
Workplace Ostracism (WO)	0.971	0.974	0.746

All α and CR values are greater than 0.70, showing strong reliability. AVE values are also above 0.50, confirming convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017).

To check discriminant validity, the Fornell–Larcker test was used. Table 4.4 shows that the square roots of AVE (diagonal values) are higher than the correlations in their rows and columns. This means each construct is distinct.

Table 4.2 Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker)

	CH	CWB	TL	WO	CH*WO
CH	**0.79**				
CWB	0.82	**0.85**			
TL	0.84	0.80	**0.83**		
WO	0.784	0.79	0.824	**0.86**	
CH*WO	0.518	0.392	0.540	0.461	**0.71**

These results confirm good reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Structural Model (Testing of Hypotheses)

The second step was the structural model, which tests the links between toxic leadership, workplace ostracism, coping humor, and counterproductive work behaviour (CWB). The test uses path coefficients (β), t-values, and p-values. A path is significant if $\beta > 0.20$, $t > 1.96$, and $p < 0.05$ (Hair et al., 2019).

Explanatory Power (R^2)

Table 4.3 R^2 Values

Endogenous Construct	R^2	R^2 Adjusted
CWB	0.787	0.785
WO	0.652	0.651

The model explains 65.2% of the variance in workplace ostracism and 78.7% of the variance in counterproductive work behavior. These are considered strong levels of explanatory power (Purwanto & Sudargini, 2021).

Direct Effects

The direct effects of toxic leadership, workplace ostracism, and coping humor were tested.

Table 4.4 Direct Effects

Path	Hypothesis	β	t-value	p-value
TL → WO	H1	0.807	30.031	0.000
WO → CWB	H2	0.678	13.616	0.000
CH*WO → CWB	H4	0.057	2.145	0.032

- **H1**: Toxic leadership has a strong, positive, significant effect on workplace ostracism ($\beta = 0.807$, $p < 0.001$).
- **H2**: Workplace ostracism has a positive, significant effect on CWB ($\beta = 0.678$, $p < 0.001$).
- **H4**: Coping humor moderates the link between ostracism and CWB ($\beta = 0.057$, $p = 0.032$). This shows coping humor changes how ostracism influences deviant behaviours.

Indirect Effects (Mediation)

Mediation was tested for the path **TL → WO → CWB** using bootstrapping.

Table 4.4 Mediation Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Direct	Indirect	Total	Remarks
H3	TL → WO → CWB	0.30	0.48	0.78	Supported

H3: Workplace ostracism mediates the relationship between toxic leadership and CWB. Both the direct effect (0.30) and indirect effect (0.48) are significant, showing partial mediation. This means toxic leadership increases CWB directly and also indirectly by increasing ostracism.

- **H1:** Toxic leadership → workplace ostracism (**supported**)
- **H2:** Workplace ostracism → CWB (**supported**)
- **H3:** Workplace ostracism mediates TL → CWB (**supported**)
- **H4:** Coping humor moderates WO → CWB (**supported**)

The results confirmed that toxic leadership increases workplace ostracism and that ostracism strongly predicts counterproductive work behaviour. Mediation analysis showed that ostracism partly explains how toxic leadership leads to negative outcomes. Coping humor was also found to play a role in moderating the effect of ostracism on CWB, suggesting it can buffer negative impacts. Together, these results provide strong evidence that toxic leadership indirectly fuels

counterproductive behaviours through social exclusion, and coping humour helps employees deal with such situations.

Discussion

The findings confirmed that TL increases WO. They also showed that WO increases CWB. In addition, WO was found to mediate the relationship between TL and CWB, while CH was shown to moderate the path from WO to CWB. Together, these findings provide new understanding of how negative leadership behaviours spread in the workplace and how they can be reduced. The study found a strong positive link between TL and WO. This means that when leaders behave in a harsh, disrespectful, or authoritarian way, employees feel ignored or excluded. Such behaviour creates a culture where workers are socially isolated and lose the sense of belonging in their teams. These findings agree with earlier research that identified abusive supervision as a major cause of ostracism (Tepper, 2000; Robinson et al., 2013). Toxic leaders often use fear, blame, and dominance to control their subordinates. This behaviour leads employees to distance themselves from their leaders and sometimes from their colleagues as well. Over time, exclusion becomes part of the workplace culture. Prior studies also suggest that toxic leaders damage trust and fairness in organisations, which can increase the chances of ostracism (Ahmed et al., 2024). The current study supports these earlier ideas and shows that TL is an important driver of WO. The results also showed a strong positive effect of WO on CWB. Employees who feel excluded are more likely to respond with negative behaviours such as withdrawal, lateness, lack of effort, or even sabotage. This agrees with Social Exchange Theory, which suggests that when workers feel unfairly treated, they try to restore balance by giving less or by retaliating (Blau, 1964; Robinson et al., 2013).Other researchers also found that ostracism reduces job satisfaction and increases stress, which then leads to counterproductive behaviours (Howard et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). The results of this study support those findings. WO acts as a psychological stressor that makes employees less committed and more likely to harm organisational outcomes. This analysis also indicated that WO mediates the relationship between TL and CWB. This implies that the impact of toxic leaders on behaviour is not only direct, but indirect, whereby employees are driven into CWB by the exclusion methods of the leaders. When leaders treat employees in a malignant manner, then it will result in a setting where the workers do not feel accommodated. This refusal then adds to frustration and stress, and results in CWB. This finding is consistent with Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory which states that employees require such resources as trust, respect, and inclusion. The removal of these resources by toxic leaders creates stress and employees respond by depriving themselves of these resources in adverse ways (Hobfoll, 1989). This observation also confirms the Social Exchange Theory since being excluded is an indication of a failed exchange relationship, and thus employees feel entitled to retaliate (Robinson et al., 2013).Prior research also indicated that one of the main avenues of toxic behaviours in employees is through ostracism (Howard et al., 2020). This mechanism is confirmed by the current study through the use of statistics. It demonstrates that leaders do not just do harm but also do it indirectly creating negative workplace climates. It was also discovered that CH mediated the impact of WO on CWB. This implies that when employees employ humour to cope with stress, chances of indulging in negative behaviours are minimal in case they feel marginalised. CH is a protective factor making the adverse effect of ostracism smaller. This observation is in line with the Broaden-and-Build Theory of positive emotions. This theory states that positive emotions such as humour widen the mind of a person and aids him to develop coping resources (Fredrickson, 2001). When employees laugh at their problems or apply humour to relieve stress, they can readily minimise stress and prevent adverse response. Recent research also helps to mention the importance of humour in minimizing the impacts of stressors at work (Cheng et al., 2021; Simione and Gnagnarella, 2023). This literature is complemented in the current research, which demonstrates that humour can specifically affect the impact of ostracism

on deviant behaviours. This demonstrates that individual coping mechanisms are relevant in dealing with the adverse consequences of toxic leadership. The results of this study give some important contributions to theory. The study shows new evidence about the impact of toxic leadership. Earlier theories explained toxic leaders as people who harm subordinates through abuse, manipulation, and selfish behaviour (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). This study goes further by showing that the damage of toxic leadership is not limited to the leader–employee relationship but also affects the whole workplace climate. Toxic leaders create an environment where exclusion becomes normal. This means that toxic leadership is not only about individual behaviour but also about building a toxic system within organisations. The findings also show that workplace ostracism plays an important role as a pathway between toxic leadership and negative behaviour. This supports Social Exchange Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, which suggest that when people lose resources like trust and fairness, they may respond with harmful behaviours. The study shows that ostracism is not just a result of toxic leadership but also the main reason why employees engage in counterproductive work behaviours. This helps to explain more clearly how leadership style translates into employee actions and workplace outcomes. Another contribution of the study is about coping humour. The findings show that humour can reduce the negative effects of exclusion. This means that humour works as a protective resource that helps employees handle stress better. This supports the Broaden-and-Build Theory, which suggests that positive emotions give people the strength to face challenges and build resilience. Overall, the study suggests that theories of leadership should not only explain the harm caused by toxic leaders but also include the ways employees can protect themselves. Coping humour is one example of a positive strategy that can limit damage. This opens new opportunities for research on how positive coping resources interact with negative leadership.

The results of this study give some important lessons for managers and organisations. First, it is clear that toxic leadership creates many problems. It makes employees feel excluded and increases negative behaviours. Organisations should therefore try hard to stop toxic leadership. Leaders should be trained to understand how harmful behaviour, such as shouting, ignoring workers, or being unfair, damages both people and the organisation. Rules and policies should also be created so that employees can safely report toxic behaviour. These reports should be taken seriously, and action should be taken to stop such behaviour. Second, the study shows the importance of the psychological contract. This means the unspoken agreement of trust and respect between employees and the organisation. When this contract is broken, employees feel stressed and tired, and they may react in harmful ways. To reduce this risk, organisations should give support to employees. For example, they can offer counselling services, stress management training, and regular health checks. These actions can protect employees and make them feel valued. Third, the study found that coping humour helps reduce the harm of workplace ostracism. This means that employees who use humour to deal with stress are less likely to act against the organisation. Organisations can use this finding by teaching employees how to use humour in a positive way. Training sessions can show how humour can make teams stronger and help people see problems in a lighter way. This can improve morale and reduce stress. Finally, the study reminds managers that even employees who usually have a good relationship with their boss can be hurt by toxic leadership. If a leader treats such an employee badly even once, it can feel like betrayal. This can lead to stronger negative reactions. For this reason, leaders must be fair and respectful to all employees, all the time. Leadership training should include not only technical skills but also emotional intelligence, ethics, and fairness. Like any research, this study has some limits. These limits give ideas for future research. First, the study was done only in the service sector, with data collected from private organisations. This means the results may not apply to other industries such as education, manufacturing, or government offices. Future studies should look at other industries to see if toxic leadership works the same way there. Second, this study focused only on private

organisations. It did not compare private and public organisations. Future research could study both types and compare if toxic leadership is stronger or weaker in one sector. Third, most participants were female. This makes the study less balanced. Future studies should try to include equal numbers of men and women and compare if gender makes a difference in how toxic leadership is experienced. Fourth, this study used a cross-sectional design, meaning data were collected at only one point in time. This makes it hard to know the cause-and-effect relationship. Future studies could use a longitudinal design, where data are collected over months or years, to show how toxic leadership, ostracism, humour, and negative behaviours change with time. Fifth, the study used a quantitative survey method. Surveys give good numbers, but people may not always answer honestly. Some employees may have been afraid to tell the truth about their leaders. Future studies could also use qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to get deeper and more honest answers. Finally, this study looked only at a few outcomes of toxic leadership, such as ostracism and counterproductive behaviour. Future research could study other outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organisational cynicism, or teamwork. Other coping methods, like mindfulness, resilience training, or social support, could also be tested to see if they protect employees. In this research, the objective was to learn the impact of toxic leadership on individuals and organisations. It examined the contribution of ostracism at workplace, relative coping humour and counterproductive working behaviour. These findings reveal that there are severe adverse outcomes of toxic leadership. The employees feel excluded by the toxic leaders, and the exclusion causes adverse behaviours, which include lateness, withdrawal, or sabotage. Another important factor that the study discovered is the cause of negative behaviours as a result of toxic leadership is workplace ostracism. That is, exclusion is an intermediate between poor leadership and undesirable behaviors. Meanwhile, the study discovered that, to some extent such negative impacts can be alleviated with the help of coping humour. Employees who humour themselves to cope with stress would have less chances of responding in a harmful manner even when they feel isolated. It demonstrates that even positive coping skills are not enough to allow employees to survive in a toxic workplace, yet they cannot completely offset the damage of toxic leadership. It has also been identified that toxic leadership is not only harmful to people in the study. It also permeates down to the broader workplace culture, making it a poor environment. This renders the success of organisations difficult. In reality organisations should not ignore toxic leadership. To prevent toxic behaviour, they should establish a safe means through which employees can report such behaviour and give training to leaders to be fair and respectful. They are also supposed to assist the employees in counselling, stress management and humour training. The research has certain limitations, yet the research opens new avenues of research. Further research can investigate other industries, apply alternative research methodology and experiment with additional coping strategies. To sum up, toxic leadership is detrimental to organisations and employees. It causes tension, marginalisation and unconstructive behaviour. But coping humour demonstrates that positive personal skills can be used to mitigate the damage. Through the integration of good leadership behaviours and organisational supportive policies, workplaces can be healthy and successful.

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