

EFFECT OF DESPOTIC LEADERSHIP ON ORGANIZATIONAL CYNICISM: ROLE OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to find out the effect of despotic leadership on organizational cynicism both directly and with the mediating role of moral disengagement. It was also posited that organizational identification inversely moderates the effect of despotic leadership on organizational cynicism. Data was collected from the SMEs in Gujranwala Division of Punjab, Pakistan. The sample consisted of 280 randomly chosen front line employees from nine strata of SME manufacturing concerns. To empirically test the hypothesized model, SEM (Structural equation modelling) and Process Macros in SPSS 25 were used. The results confirm the hypothesized model. Despotic leadership has positive effect on organizational cynicism. Moral disengagement mediated between despotic leadership and organizational cynicism. Furthermore, results proved that employees higher on organizational identification were lesser cynic and vice versa. The study is first of its first kind and has advanced our understanding of dark leadership, cynicism, disengagement and organizational identification in the SMEs. The results guide the leadership practice by highlighting the ill-effects of despotic leadership. The study has important implications for literature, policy and managerial practice presented in the end.

Keywords: despotic leadership, moral disengagement, cynicism, identification.

JEL Classification: M00, M10, M12, M14, I31.

Introduction

Leadership is all about influence, be it positive or negative. Historically, both the scholars and practitioners have connoted leadership in positive terms with favorable outcomes at individual, group, and organizational levels (Ertutlu & Chafra, 2018; Naseer et al., 2016). There is extant literature in the leadership domain that has debated about the leadership behaviors which are positive in nature, i.e., transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, ethical leadership, and authentic leadership etc. However, corporate failures, such as ENRON and WorldCom, in the last decade have raised apprehensions about the negative effects of leadership also. The scholarly literature has started to burgeon focusing the dark face of leadership as well (e.g. De Clercq et al., 2018; Nauman et al., 2018). Lately, the interest in the dysfunctionalities of leadership has increased. With this shift in focus, the researchers are

concerned about how the darker side of leadership affects the followers (Naseer et al., 2016).

To identify the negative aspect of leadership, a handful of terms have been coined with a conceptual domain unique to each of them. For instance, toxic leadership (Reed, 2004); a leader behavior having poisonous effects for individuals groups and groups (Lipman-Blumen, 2005): tyrannical leadership (Ashforth, 1994); a leader behavior involving self-aggrandizement, humiliating followers, arbitrariness, forced conflict resolution, and non-verbal aggression: abusive leadership (Tepper, 2000); “sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178), and despotic leadership (Aronson, 2001). We are interested in despotic leadership primarily for the contention made by Schilling (2009) that it explains the darker side of leadership in more comprehensive terms than other conceptualizations. Despotic leaders tend to dominate others and

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show supremacy over others. They advance personal objectives. Such leaders are arrogant, manipulative, bossy, and demanding (House & Howell, 1992). Furthermore, not enough research has been conducted on despotic leadership in the discipline of organization studies (Nauman et al., 2018). This study focuses upon despotic leadership and attempt to answer two fundamental questions: how do despotic leaders make their followers cynic about their organization; whether in response to the despotic leadership, followers develop cynicism equally in case they identify with their organization or otherwise. These directions of investigation are inspired by the gap highlighted by Erkutlu and Chafra (2017), Nauman et al. (2018) and Erkutlu and Chafra (2018). Erkutlu and Chafra (2017) advised research into role of leader for enhancing cynicism in organization. Nauman et al. (2018) advocated for further research into consequences of despotic leadership, underlying mechanisms, and boundary conditions. Erkutlu and Chafra (2018) recommended further research into the contextual situations, individual and/or organizational, which can potentially exacerbate the effect of despotic leadership on follower outcomes.

According to Aronson (2001, p. 252), “despotic leadership is a leader’s tendency to engage in authoritarian and dominant behavior in order to pursue self-interest, self-aggrandizement, and the exploitation of followers”. Such leaders are vengeful and are inclined to exercise control over the people and resources around themselves (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). In doing so, they are interested to win unchallenged submission from their followers. They prefer their own gains over the welfare of their followers without any repentance (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Thus, they have questionable moral standards and move away from the goals they have been entrusted upon by their organization. The recent findings have reported that with the negative behavior, despotic leaders have adverse impacts on their followers, such as: deviance (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018), work-family conflict (Nauman et al., 2018), reduced citizenship behavior, lesser performance, and low creativity (Naseer et al., 2016). Till date, we did not find any study which has investigated that how despotic leaders contribute to organizational cynicism among employees. This is the first objective of this study. With this, we address the call for further research into the negative impacts of despotic leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

For a better understanding, we also examine the mediating mechanism of moral disengagement. Also, the moderating influence of organizational identification has been proposed. Developing upon the theory of social learning (Bandura, 1986), it is proposed that the impact of despotic leadership on organizational cynicism shall be transmitted through followers’ moral disengagement. While despotic leaders exercise their negative influence, it signals to the followers to depart from the ethical standards and engage in cynic behaviors. Furthermore, organizational deviance operates as a boundary condition in this framework.

The novelty of this study is threefold. First, it fills the gap by empirically validating the link between despotic leadership and cynicism. Leaders are the representatives of the organization. Their behavior indicates to the follower as to how their organization values them. Grounding upon Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive paradigm, we not only provide support for direct linkage but also examine the intervening and moderating effects. Second, this study validates the moral disengagement as an underlying mechanism between despotic leadership and organizational cynicism. Third, it advances our understanding by examining organizational identification as a boundary condition for despotic leadership and organizational cynicism linkage, which is a novel evidence.

1. Literature and hypotheses development

1.1. Despotic leadership and organizational cynicism

Despotic leaders need un-questioned compliance of orders and absolute submission from their followers. They are aggressive, demanding and have a controlling leadership style. They behave egoistically, callously and in a selfish manner towards their team. They are act contrary to their desires and wishes of their followers (Schilling, 2009). Despotic leadership exercise solid power over subordinates. They develop high power-distance relationships amongst the two ends. Despotic leaders have a very self-oriented personality, are morally corrupt, and have questionable ethical standards (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008).

According to Dean et al. (1998, p. 345) “organizational cynicism is a negative attitude toward one’s employing organization”. It comprises of an understanding that the organization is unfair, lacks sincerity and integrity. Abraham (2000) noted that frustration, distrust, and disillusionment are particularly the facets of employees’ cynicism of their organization. It can further be manifested by the employees’ frustrated body language, hopelessness, and contempt towards the organization (Andersson & Bateman, 1997). Consistent with the social exchange perspective, cynicism stems from unpleasant employment relationship. Employees feel unfairly treated and hold themselves to pose confidence in their organization as a result of unfair treatment. Cynical employees not only experience negative attitudes, but engage in negative behaviors also (Lorinkova & Perry, 2017). In the recent times, few studies have related different style of leadership and organizational cynicism such as: empowering leadership (Lorinkova & Perry, 2017); toxic leadership (Dobbs & Do, 2019); and paternalistic leadership (Sungur et al., 2019). However, the linkage between cynicism and despotic leadership still remains to be investigated.

Leaders are the organizational representatives; their behavior is instrumental to influence the perceptions of followers for the organization. Colquitt et al. (2014) provided that exchange phenomenon is not only applicable

to explain positive reciprocation but to negative reciprocation also. Despotic leaders adopt a negative leadership style. They are callous, egoistic and selfish (Schilling, 2009). Such leaders have detrimental effects on followers' morale. The followers attribute the behavior of leaders as a representation of the organization (Davis & Gardner, 2004). Eventually, the followers feel frustrated, hopeless, disillusioned. They develop the tendency to contempt their supervisor and the organization (Dobbs & Do, 2019). Since organizational cynicism is an attitudinal response characterizing the blame attribution towards their organization, it is highly likely that a negative treatment received from the supervisor would be paid back in the same coin (Lorinkova & Perry, 2017). Hence, based on the social exchange perspective, it is proposed:

H1: Despotic leadership will have a positive effect on organizational cynicism.

1.2. Despotic leadership and moral disengagement

Bandura (1991) opines that moral disengagement is a process in which individuals ignore personal standards, justifying unethical conduct. It is a tendency of humans to distance themselves from the ethical standards (Shu et al., 2011; Boardley & Kavussanu, 2010). Shu et al. (2011) further noted that employees' moral disengagement manifests in various forms, for instance, individuals may portray unethical behavior for serving moral purpose, may attribute their behavior to external cues, may distort the consequence of behavior, and may dehumanize the recipient of unethical behavior. Those morally disengaged usually move from their ethical boundaries and make an attempt to appear less immoral.

Bandura (1986) extended that general framework of social thought and action frequently outlined as social cognitive perspective and coined it as a phenomenon of moral disengagement. Bandura proposed that while the self-regulatory mechanisms of individuals operate properly, they deter themselves to engage in amoral activities in anticipation of self-condemnation which establishes upon their self-defined and internalized ethical standards. Moral disengagement theory describes that when the self-regulatory process fails, there occurs a cognitive disconnection between transgressive behavior and self-sanctioning that may deter engagement in amoral actions. Those morally disengaged individuals are more likely to commit human atrocities for political, or military interests (Bonner et al., 2016). In the corporate world, morally disengaged individuals have happened to engage in corrupt practices without cognitive distress or remorse (Bandura et al., 2000). Perren and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger (2012) maintained that morally disengaged people enact ethically misaligned behaviors without feeling any guilt. They choose to justify their behavior by selectively activating the cognitive mechanisms which allow them to overlook negative self-sanctions and self-evaluations.

People disengage themselves morally by drawing upon the context around themselves, as Palmer (2013) argues that [unethical] behavior of significant others influences the way an individual justifies his/her unethical conduct. Since leaders influence on followers directly (Bonner et al., 2016), the leadership behavior can potentially predict moral disengagement (Palmer, 2013). Amongst the many facets of leadership, despotic leadership is more likely to disengage people morally as such leaders are the ones who behave in callous, egoistic and selfish manner (Schilling, 2009). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) can help ground the association.

Social learning theory proposed that people learn from the behavior of respectable others (Bandura, 1977). Leaders signal to the employees, through role modelling, the kind of desirable behaviors. Ethical leaders lay down and through their actions reinforce behaviors such as respect, honesty, and fairness. Contrarily, unethical leaders establish negative behavior as the norm, subsequently, the followers engage in such behavior and depart from the moral standards. Furthermore, while the unethical actions are reinforced by an abusive leader, the followers no longer experience a feeling of self-condemnation. Hence:

H2: Despotic leadership will have positive effect on moral disengagement.

1.3. Moral disengagement and organizational cynicism

It is established in extant literature that moral disengagement has negative effect on many organizationally relevant deviant/unethical behaviors (e.g. Hystad et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2012; Shu et al., 2011). Individuals who are morally disengaged are a more likely to exhibit unethical conduct (Bandura, 1986; Bonner et al., 2016; Shu et al., 2011). Moore et al. (2012) particularly pointed out that moral disengagement has a significant impact on various negative behaviors and attitudes (Martin et al., 2014). Cynicism is a negative attitude aimed towards the organization (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Dean et al., 1998). Moral disengagement theory can help us ground the relationship between cynicism and disengagement.

Moral disengagement refers to a process of disconnection between moral regulation and actions (Bandura, 1986). Morally disengaged individuals engage in unethical actions by ignoring the moral cues, and in anticipation of post-hoc justification of their actions (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). Moral disengagement facilitates unethical conduct by weakening the moral awareness and by biasing the judgement, hence, it becomes a vehicle for unethical behavior in organizations (Martin et al., 2014). In recent studies (Egan et al., 2015; Hystad et al., 2014), the positive effect of moral disengagement on deviant and anti-social behavior has been established empirically. Therefore, it is proposed that:

H3: Moral disengagement will have positive effect on organizational cynicism.

1.4. Mediating role of moral disengagement

Literature has established the intervening role of moral disengagement between organizationally relevant antecedents and follower behaviors. For instance Liu et al. (2012) provided that moral disengagement intervenes between ethical leadership and workplace deviance. Palmer (2013) empirically provided that link between leaders' and followers' behavior is partially mediated by the mechanism of moral disengagement. Hystad et al. (2014) examined that perceived injustice and deviant behavior are partially mediated by moral disengagement. Fida et al. (2015) proved that lack of support, interpersonal conflict, constraints and workload affect counterproductive behavior through the partial mediating effect of moral disengagement. Furthermore, Zhao et al. (2019) also investigated that moral disengagement plays as a partial underlying mechanism between norms and ill intentions. Likewise, Zhou et al. (2019) also showed that moral disengagement partially mediates between personality traits and cyberbullying. Hence, the literature shows that moral disengagement is a partial mediator rather than a full mediator. In the similar fashion, despotic leadership and cynicism may be expected to be partially mediated by moral disengagement. The following paragraph theorizes the same under the aegis of moral of disengagement theory.

Drawing upon Bandura's (1986) contentions, it may be argued that leader's behavior influences followers through self-regulatory processes of followers. It builds mechanism by which ethical or unethical behavior of leaders transmits to followers. Palmer (2013) terms such regulatory processes as the moral capacities. An ethical leader reinforces such moral capacities through his/her behavior (Liu et al., 2012), vis-à-vis, a despotic leader displaces followers of their moral positions. The followers in return engage in actions detrimental to the organization. Furthermore, authors (Hystad et al., 2014; Saidon et al., 2010) argued that the climate of an organization increases/decreases an employee's disposition to morally disengage, hence, the employee outcomes in terms of counterproductive behavior or cynicism may be regarded as an interplay of the context employee finds himself in and the way he/she responds by a self-regulatory process. Therefore, in a climate where a leader, a despot, has an amoral position, a followers would be more possibly engage in cynic behavior as the phenomenon of social exchange (Blau, 1964) also suggest likewise. Such intervening role of moral disengagement shall be partial as the previous studies (Fida et al., 2015; Hystad et al., 2014; Palmer, 2013; Zhou et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2019) also provided. Therefore, based on the above:

H4: Moral disengagement will partially mediate between despotic leadership and organizational cynicism.

1.5. Moderating role of organizational identification

Ashforth and Mael (1989) refer to organizational identification as the degree to which employees define themselves with respect to their relationship with the organization.

In simpler words, it is the definition of self in terms of the values, norms, and goals of the employer. The identification of an individual with the organization converges the goals of the employee with those of the organization (Ashforth et al., 2008), hence, it can help explain various individual level outcomes (Van Dick et al., 2004).

Wang et al. (2017) argued that where employees rate higher on organizational identification, the employee outcomes of leader behavior are affected significantly. Organizational identification, as a moderating variable, has been studied in numerous leadership studies and interesting results have been reported. Wang et al. (2017) found that the effect of transformational leadership is weaker for employee adaptability in the presence of higher organizational identification. Vondey (2008) confirmed the moderating effect of identification for the linkage between servant leadership and citizenship behavior. Similarly, Mostafa (2018) held that identification has a direct moderating effect between ethical leadership and citizenship behavior.

Social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) proposes that organizational identification means a oneness perception of an employee with their organization. The theory further provides that the identification forces the employee to engage in those actions conforming the identity and avoid the otherwise. Such employees have internalized the value system of the organization and intrinsically motivated to perform in the favor of their organization. They is a lesser appetite for someone to lead them (Mostafa, 2018; Wang et al., 2017). This study proposes that the organizational identification dampens the effect of despotic leadership on cynicism. Grounding upon the tenets of social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), we contend that in case employees rank higher on organizational they are not likely to turn adopt a cynic behavior towards their organization despite the despotic attitude of their leader. The contention is reinforced for the fact that the identifying employees have already internalized the norms of the organization and have submitted themselves the values of the organization, hence, they are less likely to influence by the behavior of their leader. Therefore, it is proposed that:

H5: Organizational Identification will dampen the effect of despotic leadership on organizational cynicism.

The conceptual framework is presented below (Figure 1):

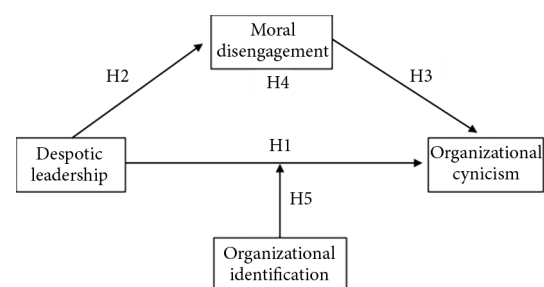


Figure 1. Conceptual model

2. Research methodology

2.1. Population and sampling

Employees working in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Gujranwala Division of Pakistan were the population of this study. According to a rough approximation, about 3.2 million business ventures are successfully working in Pakistan. They contribute 30% to the national GDP, 25% to exports, and 35% to the value-added products in manufacturing (SMEDA, 2018). Furthermore, majority of SMEs are family-owned SMEs and the issue of despotic leadership is more probable to prevail there. Recently, building on the claim that despotic leadership has long been held to have far-reaching effects on employees working in SMEs, Zhou et al. (2021) explored the linkage between job satisfaction and despotic leadership of employees working in Chinese SMEs. The effects on job satisfaction were negative.

In this study, the research design followed was stratified random sampling. According to SMEDA (2017), the SME sector can be subdivided into nine sectors: Gas Appliances; Sanitary Fittings; Wooden Furniture; Light Engineering; Ceramics; Fan Industry; Home Appliances; Foundry; Sports. Questionnaires were distributed amongst the front-line employees in all the strata proportionately. We targeted front-line employees because in their inquiry, Harris and Ogbonna (2013) found that front-line employees are likely to engage in anti-management/anti-firm behaviors. Furthermore, Abubakar et al. (2017), and Li and Chen (2018) also targeted front-line employees and confirmed the prevalence of cynicism among them.

Table 1. Sample calculation (source: SMEDA, 2017)

Sr #	Strata / Industry	Total Population of Full time Employees	No. of Organizations	Selected Sample (No. of respondents)
1	Gas Appliances	450	32	7
2	Sanitary Fittings	2,836	218	44
3	Wooden Furniture	8,000	327	123
4	Light Engineering	2,000	270	31
5	Ceramics	5,000	65	77
6	Fan Industry	1,500	153	23
7	Home Appliances	2,877	271	45
8	Foundry	750	39	12
9	Sports	2,480	500	39
	Total	25,893	1,875	400

2.2. Sample size and data collection procedure

Population (N) of the present study is known. Sample of the study was determined as per the recommendation of Taro Yamane (Yamane, 1967):

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Assumptions 95% confidence level, level of significance p values p = .05. Sample from each stratum is calculated using formula: nh = (sample size/population size) x stratum size.

The table below shows the profile of each stratum and the proportionate sample out of each.

Questionnaires were distributed through HR office. Three reminders were sent to enhance response rate and avoid non-response bias. The number of questionnaires distributed were 400. The questionnaires received back were 320, with a response rate of 80%. After initial screening, questionnaires having more than 20% missing values, having unengaged or patterned responses were discarded. The number of responses left for analysis were 280. The final sample consisted of: 3.9% from Gas Appliances sector, 11.1% from Sanitary Fitting sector, 33.2% from Wood Furniture, 11.4% from Light Engineering, 13.6% from Ceramics, 4.6% from Fan Industry, 10.4% from Home Appliances, 5% from Foundry and 6.8% to Sports Industry.

2.3. Measures

All the measures were adopted, having acceptable psychometrics, and Likert scale (5-point) was used.

For despotic leadership, a six-item measure developed by Hanges and Dickson (2004) was used. The reported reliability of this scale was 0.89.

For organizational cynicism, a 12 items scale developed by Dean et al. (1998) was used. The reported reliability of the scale was 0.884.

Moral disengagement was measured using 24-item scale developed by Detert et al. (2008) The reported reliability score of the scale was 0.834.

For organizational identification, a unidimensional scale was used. It has 6 items. The scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) was used. The reported reliability of this measure was 0.91.

Furthermore, it is to be mentioned that all the measures were reflective. The structural relations between reflective measures can better tested by applying Covariance Based Structural Equations Modelling (CB-SEM) (Lowry & Gaskin, 2014; Zhang et al., 2021). The analytical procedure has been further described below.

2.4. Analytical strategy

The two step approach to structural equations modelling was used for analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). First, we tested the validity of the factor model with confirmatory analysis in AMOS V.20. Second, structural model was run in AMOS V.20 to test direct and indirect effects. Later,

the interaction effect of organizational identification was tested using Process Macro (Hayes & Preacher, 2014) in the SPSS environment. The detailed results and interpretation have been given below.

3. Results

3.1. Confirmatory factor analysis

3.1.1. Model fit

Following two step approach to structural equations modelling (Hair et al., 2018), measurement model was evaluated at the first step by conducting the confirmatory factor analysis. The confirmatory factor model did not yield a decent fit in the first run (see Table 2). Hair et al. (2018) stated that modification indices (MI) suggest possible improvement in the CFA model. To improve CFA fit, covariances were added between error terms. The model provided best fit in next iteration. Table 1 displays both initial model, and modified model fit. Results show modified model ($\chi^2/df = 2.269$, RMSEA = .067, CFI = .898, TLI = .905 and SRMR = .058) was better fit than the initial model ($\chi^2/df = 2.582$, RMSEA = .067, CFI = .864, TLI = .857 and SRMR = .059). Following the recommendations of Shah and Goldstein (2006), an alternative model with all loadings on to a single factor were also tested in order to find out alternative explanations, if any. The single factor model did not show a perfect fit. After evaluating the global fit, the local fit was assessed. Local fit refers to the value and significance of factor loadings. All the item loadings exceeded the threshold, 0.5, and were significant, $p < 0.05$ (Hair et al., 2018).

3.1.2. Common method bias

Since the data was single source, the possibility of method bias was likely (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Based on the

advice of Podsakoff et al. (2012) the latent factor method was used. A common factor was added to measurement model in AMOS. Results showed that difference between loadings with CLF and without was below 0.20. Thus, it is concluded that there is no CMB present (see Table A1).

3.1.3. Construct correlations, reliability, and validity

The below table (see Table 3) shows correlations, validity and reliability measures. Correlations among all the constructs were significant. The table also reports Cronbach's alpha, all the constructs recorded α above the threshold, 0.70 (Hair et al., 2018). Another measure of reliability has also been reported, i.e. composite reliability (CR). The composite reliabilities were: despotic leadership; 0.871, organizational cynicism; 0.960, moral disengagement; 0.978, and organizational identification; 0.906, all above 0.70 (Gaskin & Lim, 2016).

For assessing the validity, the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion was used. Validity, convergent, was assessed with average variance extracted (AVE). The threshold value has been recommended as 0.50. The average variance extracted by despotic leadership, organizational cynicism, moral disengagement and organizational identification was 0.532, 0.666, 0.651, and 0.615 respectively. For discriminant validity, the AVE was compared with MSV (Maximum Shared Variance), and it should fall below (Hair et al., 2018), the results confirmed it. Fornell and Larcker (1981) advised that AVE square root should be above inter construct correlations. The diagonal in table below (see Table 3) reports square rooted AVE, indicating the establishment of discriminant validity.

3.2. Hypotheses testing

Hypotheses were tested using structural model in AMOS. Moderating effects were tested with the help of Process Macro (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). The results follow.

Table 2. Measurement model fit

Model	Description of Model	CMIN/df	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
Initial Model	Four Factor	2.582	0.864	0.857	0.059	0.075
Modified Model	Four Factor	2.269	0.898	0.905	0.058	0.067
Cut-off Values*		CMIN/df < 3	CFI > .90	TLI > .90	SRMR < .08	RMSEA < .08

Table 3. Construct correlations, reliability, and validity

	CR	AVE	MSV	DL	OC	MD	OD
DL	0.871	0.532	0.418	(0.730)			
OC	0.960	0.666	0.197	0.444***	(0.816)		
MD	0.978	0.651	0.418	0.646***	0.418***	(0.807)	
OID	0.905	0.615	0.192	-0.185**	-0.438***	-0.087*	(0.784)
Cronbach α				0.872	0.960	0.978	0.908
Mean				3.756	3.039	3.373	2.551
SD				.8312	1.099	1.026	1.036

Note: Composite Reliability = CR, Average Variance Extracted = AVE, Maximum Shared Variance = MSV, * $p < 0.050$, ** $p < 0.010$, *** $p < 0.001$.

3.2.1. Model fit

The results of Structural regression model fit are also in accordance with the threshold values; hence, the model was fit (see Table 4).

Table 4. Structural regression model fit (source: Hair et al., 2018)

Model	CMIN/df	CFI	SRMR	TLI	RMSEA
Hypothesized	2.586	0.942	0.057	0.919	0.065
Cut-off Values*	CMIN/df <3	CFI >.90	SRMR <0.08	TLI >.90	RMSEA <.08

3.2.2. Direct effects

H1 hypothesized that despotic leadership positively affects organizational cynicism. The results showed in Table 5 that despotic leadership has significant effect on organizational cynicism ($\beta = 0.287, p < .001$), moreover the model explained 22% variance ($R^2 = 0.226$).

H2 proposed the positive effect of moral disengagement on organizational cynicism. The results supported the results ($\beta = 0.237, p < .001$), and there is 22% variance explained ($R^2 = 0.226$).

Table 5. Direct effects

Paths	Standardized path coefficients	p-value	R2
DL→CYN	0.287	***	0.226
MD→CYN	0.237	***	-
DL→MD	0.642	***	0.413

H3 proposed positive effect of despotic leadership on moral disengagement. The results show that (see Table 5) despotic leadership has significant effect on moral disengagement as ($\beta = 0.642, p < .001$). A variance of 41% was explained ($R^2 = 0.413$).

3.2.3. Test of mediation

H4 hypothesized that the relationship of despotic leadership with cynicism will be intervened by moral disengagement. The results exhibited that intervening effect was significant ($\beta = 0.152, p <= 0.001$), and was statistically non-zero (LCI = 0.052, UCI = 0.252) as shown in Table 6.

Furthermore, the mediating effect was partial. The inclusion of mediator, moral disengagement, between despotic leadership and cynicism did not make this effect insignificant. Hence, partial mediation was confirmed.

3.2.4. Test of moderation

Process Macros by Hayes and Preacher (2014) was used for the interaction effect of organizational identification. The moderation model was fit. F value show that overall model was fit ($F = 53.2753, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.366$), and is significant ($p < .05$).

Table 7 shows that the results of moderation. A 95% confidence interval (bias corrected), 5000 bootstrapped sample shows that the interaction of organizational identification was significant ($\beta = -0.347, p < .001$) and was statistically different from zero (LLCI = -0.460, ULCI = -0.233).

The moderation effect of OID were further probed by graphical representation. The Figure 2 shows that OID moderates the relationship such that the organizational cynicism is higher with for those higher on organizational

Table 6. Results of mediation

Organizational Cynicism						
Effects	Point of estimate	SE	BC 95% CI		p-value	Mediation observed
			Lower	Upper		
Direct effect (DL→CYN)	0.287	0.067	0.150	0.409	0.001	
Indirect effect (DL→MD→CYN)	0.152	0.051	0.052	0.252	0.002	
Total effect	0.439	0.044	0.348	0.519	0.001	Partial

Note: Mediator = Moral Disengagement, Bootstrap sample = 2000, BC = Bias Corrected, CI = Confidence Interval.

Table 7. Moderating effects

Organizational Cynicism						
Effects	Coefficient	SE	BC 95% CI		t-value	p-value
			Lower	Upper		
Constant	2.993	.0531	2.888	3.098	56.332	.000
DL	.542	.0659	.413	.672	8.231	.000
OID	-.402	.0516	-.503	-.300	-7.787	.000
DL x OID	-.347	.0576	-.460	-.233	-6.019	.000

Note: Moderator = Organizational Identification, Bootstrap sample = 5000, BC = Bias Corrected, CI = Confidence Interval.

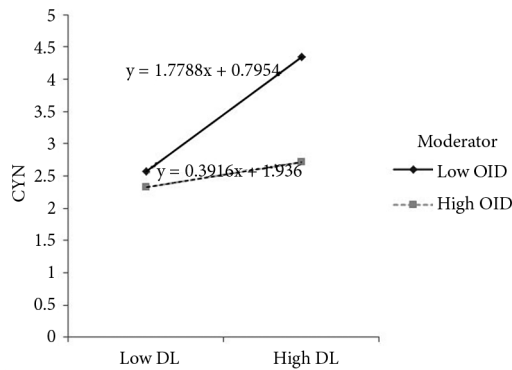


Figure 2. Moderating effect of Organizational Identification

identification, whereas, those low on organizational identification report higher organization cynicism.

Discussion and conclusions

Discussion

This paper examined the relationship between despotic leadership and cynicism in the context of SMEs in Pakistan. The relationship of despotic leadership and cynicism was also modeled and validated through the mediating role of moral disengagement. Organizational identification was taken as boundary condition in explaining the linkage between despotic leadership and organizational cynicism. The results confirmed our hypotheses. There important implication for theory and practice as highlighted below.

Theoretical implications

The dark side of leadership has been under investigation since long. In the recent times studies on despotic leadership have linked various employee outcomes such as deviance, (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018), creativity, work performance, and citizenship (Naseer et al., 2016). However, advances our understanding by relating despotic leadership with an organizationally directed employee attitude i.e., organizational cynicism. Doing so we advance our understanding of both streams of literature a step ahead. The findings also prove that leaders are the representatives of their organization. The subordinates attribute the actions of the leaders as the actions the of their organization. Any negative leader behaviors are reciprocated by employees by expressing dissatisfaction over the policies of the organization. The hypothesis that despotic leadership has positive impact on organizational cynicism was proved supporting the underlying theoretical justification that the exchange phenomenon also governs negative exchanges (Colquitt et al., 2014), that is, employees reciprocated with a cynic towards their organization based on the despotic behavior of their leader. These results also substantiate previous studies linking despotic leadership and various employee outcomes (De Clercq et al., 2019; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2017, 2018; Naseer et al., 2016; Nauman et al., 2018).

The study also advances the literature on moral disengagement. Various studies have earlier provided that the outcomes of leadership manifest through the mediating role of disengagement (Fida et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2012; Palmer, 2013). The mechanism of moral disengagement was more suited for the translation of negative leader behavior into negative employee attitudes. Therefore, we found a significant mediating effect of disengagement. Moral disengagement was hypothesized to be positively influenced by despotic leadership. Grounding upon Bandura's (1986) general framework of social thought and action, despotic leadership was proposed to signal to the followers the kind of desired behaviors. The results have shown that despotic leaders signal followers to morally disengage. Leaders lay down the standards of behaviors in organizations. The followers either emulate such behaviors or disengage themselves.

The third hypothesis proposed that moral disengagement positively impacts organizational cynicism. The results conform the evidence put forth by previous studies (Egan et al., 2015; Hystad et al., 2014) that moral disengagement has positive effect on deviant and antisocial behaviors. The premise was based on moral disengagement perspective that moral cues are conveniently ignored by those who have once established a disconnection between moral regulation an action due to any external stimuli (Bandura, 1986; Ashforth & Anand, 2003).

Another significant role of this research is that it establishes the effect of organizational identification as an inverse moderator of the impact of leadership on cynicism. Organizational identification was hypothesized to weaken the negative impact of despotic leadership on cynicism. Our results confirm the earlier findings that in the incidence of organizational identification, the effects of leadership on followers are significantly affected (Mostafa, 2018; Vondey, 2008; Wang et al., 2017). Therefore, this study is a further substantiation to the social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) in a non-western context.

Practical implications

This study brings some practical guidelines also. As it has been argued earlier that despotic leaders are self-centered, they care less about the followers, causing dissatisfaction (De Clercq et al., 2018). This study provided that, among others, cynicism is also a counterproductive outcome of the despotic leadership. The organization should take measures to identify leaders who are not despotic. The despotic leaders have also been found to morally disengage their followers. Moral disengagement of followers should highly be matter of concern for the organizations. Once an individual disengages morally, they depart from ethical standards and are unable to differentiate between good and bad. It also calls the organizations to make careful recruitments on leadership positions. Furthermore, the organizations are advised to understand the importance of an ethical environment. In an ethical context, the despotic

behaviors do not flourish. In such environment, the despotic behaviors are likely to receive more resistance from the followers. Therefore, there are lesser chances for despots to exercise their influence (Naseer et al., 2016; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018).

In order to contain the despotic behavior, organizations can adopt two-pronged strategy. First, steps should be taken at the recruitment phase to identify the ethical issues of incumbents for managerial positions. Second, at the training phase, organizations should invest in the moral sensitization of leaders. The conduct of workshops, seminars, and individual customized coaching can be very beneficial in this regard (Simões, 2016).

Limitations and further directions

A few limitations which may be detrimental to the generalizability of this study. First, we offer some methodological suggestions. The study follows a cross-sectional design. Since there was no temporal precedence, therefore we cannot claim causality. Future researchers are advised a time lagged design. Second, the use of self-reports poses a concern for method variance. We used ex-post measures to deal with the method variance and found no such issues. The future researchers are advised to follow ex-ante measures to deal with this issue, such as the separation of responses for predictor and criterion variables (Podsakoff et al., 2012). Furthermore, the data were collected from manufacturing sector SMEs, most of them do not have a corporate structure as well as corporate culture. The future studies may consider service concerns within or out of SME sector.

Lastly, we offer certain suggestions on the theoretical side. The future research may link certain other variable in an attitude-behavior serial manner. Under a despotic leader, the followers do not directly exhibit counterproductive behaviors. Such behaviors occur after a series of reinforcement from the despotic leader. The followers first undergo a series of attitudes. The future studies may integrate a series of variables depicting attitude and behavior linkage. Moreover, certain personality traits, such as emotional stability etc. may be interesting to study as moderators in this framework. Leadership always operates in a context. Certain situational variables, such as ethical climate, is also expected to moderate the outcomes of despotic leadership, for which the empirical evidence may be missing so far.

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Author contributions

MMA and MAH conceived the study. MMA collected the data. MAA supported in data analysis. SK provided guidelines in research design. MMA wrote initial draft.

MAH revised the draft. MAA and SK critically reviewed the final draft.

Disclosure statement

Authors of this manuscript do not have any competing financial interests.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Common method bias assessment through CLF (Common Latent Factor) method

End of Table A1

Common Latent Factors					
			Estimate without CLF (A)	Estimate with CLF (B)	Difference (A-B)
CY1	<---	CYN	0.881	0.831	0.050
CY2	<---	CYN	0.824	0.758	0.066
CY3	<---	CYN	0.816	0.781	0.035
CY4	<---	CYN	0.866	0.770	0.096
CY5	<---	CYN	0.758	0.691	0.067
CY6	<---	CYN	0.824	0.750	0.074
CY7	<---	CYN	0.757	0.676	0.081
CY8	<---	CYN	0.849	0.815	0.034
CY9	<---	CYN	0.754	0.671	0.083
CY10	<---	CYN	0.831	0.754	0.077
CY11	<---	CYN	0.826	0.725	0.101
CY12	<---	CYN	0.799	0.751	0.048
DL1	<---	DL	0.793	0.669	0.124
DL2	<---	DL	0.630	0.534	0.096
DL3	<---	DL	0.727	0.588	0.139
DL4	<---	DL	0.642	0.542	0.100
DL5	<---	DL	0.776	0.623	0.153
DL6	<---	DL	0.789	0.653	0.136
MD24	<---	MD	0.722	0.608	0.114
MD23	<---	MD	0.829	0.662	0.167
MD22	<---	MD	0.842	0.665	0.177
MD21	<---	MD	0.832	0.635	0.197
MD20	<---	MD	0.833	0.735	0.098
MD19	<---	MD	0.808	0.664	0.144

Common Latent Factors					
			Estimate without CLF (A)	Estimate with CLF (B)	Difference (A-B)
MD18	<---	MD	0.802	0.612	0.190
MD17	<---	MD	0.801	0.626	0.175
MD16	<---	MD	0.801	0.605	0.196
MD15	<---	MD	0.771	0.613	0.158
MD14	<---	MD	0.800	0.612	0.188
MD13	<---	MD	0.793	0.596	0.197
MD12	<---	MD	0.801	0.627	0.174
MD11	<---	MD	0.850	0.653	0.197
MD10	<---	MD	0.774	0.578	0.196
MD9	<---	MD	0.801	0.763	0.038
MD8	<---	MD	0.822	0.646	0.176
MD7	<---	MD	0.837	0.688	0.149
MD6	<---	MD	0.789	0.589	0.200
MD5	<---	MD	0.786	0.713	0.073
MD4	<---	MD	0.843	0.655	0.188
MD3	<---	MD	0.730	0.605	0.125
MD2	<---	MD	0.843	0.726	0.117
MD1	<---	MD	0.832	0.659	0.173
OD1	<---	OD	0.839	0.821	0.018
OD2	<---	OD	0.727	0.725	0.002
OD3	<---	OD	0.705	0.700	0.005
OD4	<---	OD	0.769	0.744	0.025
OD5	<---	OD	0.717	0.700	0.017
OD6	<---	OD	0.925	0.922	0.003