

Beyond Endurance: Employee Survival Strategies and Post-Traumatic Growth in Toxic Leadership Contexts in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Toxic leadership is extremely detrimental to workers and businesses worldwide, whereas cultural aspects of survival and adaptation have not been studied well in non-Western societies. Within the framework of a highly diversified culture due to high power distance, collectivism, and financial constraints, this qualitative research explores the effects that toxic leadership has on the experience of Pakistani workers in the corporate, government, and NGO sectors and how they manage to cope with these experienced challenges. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with 24 employees who had been victims of toxic leadership for at least six months. Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework revealed six themes: toxic leadership manifestations including authoritarian control, public humiliation, favouritism, exploitation, and credit appropriation; psychological and physical harm extending to family systems; coping strategies such as emotional detachment, strategic compliance, documentation, and Islamic patience; peer and family support networks; resilience and post-traumatic growth including stronger emotional intelligence and clarified personal values; and cultural moderators including power distance, izzat (honour), and wasta (connections). With little institutional safeguard, workers performed exceptional agency with culturally based survival tactics.

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership directly affects organisational culture, employee welfare, and performance (Harms et al., 2017; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Although positive leadership is also regarded as fostering staff engagement, innovation, and dedication, toxic leadership is a harmful aspect of the corporate lifestyle that undermines dignity, psychological security, and professional advancement (Mathieu et al., 2014; Webster et al., 2016). Employees exposed to abusive supervision, authoritarian control, narcissism, and exploitative behaviours show lasting effects on mental health, job satisfaction, and performance, including greater stress and burnout, turnover intentions, and poorer organisational citizenship (Erickson et al., 2015; Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Schmidt, 2014; Webster et al., 2016). Notably, the harmful impacts do not coincide with the work setting, as they spread to family relationships, physical well-being, and overall life quality (Tepper et al., 2017; Webster et al., 2016). Despite the increasing awareness of toxic leadership, there remain considerable gaps in terms of how workers cope, accept, and develop resiliency in such harmful situations, especially in the non-Western cultural context. Toxic leadership is the continuum of destructive behaviours that handicap followers and organisations as a result of systematic misuse of power, manipulation and exploitation (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). Unlike occasional managerial mistakes, toxic leadership is depicted as a routine pattern of behaviours that either intentionally or unintentionally diminish the dignity of subordinates, their autonomy, and their career development (Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Reed, 2015).

Fortunately, the psychological and organisational consequences of toxic leadership are well described. Employees who have been subjected to such an environment experience increased psychological distress, which is presented in the form of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion (Erickson et al., 2015; Mathieu et al., 2014). The resulting stress due to toxic leadership triggers the physiological responses related to chronic stress, which include cardiovascular issues, sleeping disorders, and an impaired immune system (Tepper et al., 2017). Toxic leaders also suppress organisational trust, undermine teamwork, and foster cultures of fear that inhibit innovation and open communication (Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013; Webster et al., 2016). Toxic leaders in organisations also have elevated turnover rates, high levels of absenteeism, and poor productivity, and they cost their organisations a lot of money and reputation (Kusy & Holloway, 2009; Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

While there is a significant body of literature to explain the negative consequences of toxic leadership, there is emerging literature on coping/survival strategies of employees exposed to a toxic work environment (Mackey et al., 2017). Toxic leadership's effects on employees can be better understood

through the lens of resilience (the capacity for change following negative events, the ability to maintain one's mental health under stress, and the ability to return to a prior state of functioning) (Kuntz et al., 2016; Näswall et al., 2013). Organisational resilience can be conceptualised as a cognitive, emotional and behavioural reaction to circumstances that does not merely involve survival, but also involves a sense of competence and wellbeing remaining or being restored despite threats and challenges (Britt et al., 2016; King et al., 2016). The coping strategies used by people who have encountered workplace adversity fall into two broad categories: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). In toxic leadership "housing" a person may find several ways to cope: Redefine the situation, seek social support, set boundaries, get detached, make strategic compliance, document unethical actions, or look around for exits; this can be achieved by either searching for jobs or by making horizontal transfers (Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Neves, 2014). Coping behaviours are influenced by one's characteristics, work context, cultural beliefs and supports (Caesens et al., 2017; Mackey et al., 2017). Post-traumatic growth (PTG) goes beyond resilience; is where the survivor not only returns to the previous state of functioning, but becomes stronger, more emotionally intelligent, more purposeful and more skillfully social in their personal orientations (Maitlis, 2020) (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). The duality that is described here increases the complexity of adversity: the same adversity of toxic leadership can, under the right conditions, become the vehicle for improved self-regulation (Carver, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). It is of crucial importance, then, to identify the factors that increase resilience and factors that cause damages, as this will provide crucial information about employee support and the design of organisational intervention.

Organisation environment is unique in Pakistan; culture, economy, and structure shape how it can take a bad form and how it responds to bad leadership. It is very different from the Western environment, where most leadership research occurred, as it is rooted in a lower power distance culture, strong individualism, and a collectivist (Hofstede, 2011; Tariq & Hassan, 2024) society. Also, the power distance is very high in Pakistan, where challenging people's authority is seen as disrespectful or criticising the leader's authority is unchallengeable; that is, the power that is held by the leader may be unchallenged (Khilji & Wang, 2006; Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2015). The other cultural factor is the cultural concept of honour/ respect denoted as 'izzat', and it governs the relationship and social interaction between two people in the Pakistani context (Hopkinson & Aman, 2019). It is a value in culture that creates complicated relations in an unhealthy workplace, where workers can be abused but still keep the social order, maintain the family image and keep and preserve the general cultural norms at great personal sacrifice (Bashir et al., 2011; Naseer et al., 2016).

Besides, in the Pakistani professional scenario, known as 'wasta' or 'sifarish' (connection), is a significant factor which overrides merit and is played into hiring practices, promotions and conflict resolution within the organisation (Sarwar & Imran, 2019; Tariq & Hassan, 2024).

The negative leadership experiences in Pakistan are further complicated by gender. Women have been participating more and more in education and jobs, but a significant amount of gender discrimination, restricted access to leadership positions and workplace harassment (Afzal et al., 2019; Rehman & Roomi, 2012) persists. When women experience the toxic leadership pattern, they also have to cope with other factors such as gender-specific means of harassment, cultural norms of females being subservient, and restricted grievance paths in male-dominated organisations that affect their coping and resiliency (Ali & Kramar, 2015). Further, economic constraints will affect workers' ability to make decisions regarding their work, as a lack of social safety nets, high levels of unemployment, and a strong dependence on family income will give workers very few options to escape from the unpleasant conditions they find themselves in (Khilji & Wang, 2006; Qureshi et al., 2022). Under strong labour protections and a more fluid employment market, employees might have left these dangerous situations earlier, rather than driven by necessity and culture towards extended family (Bashir et al., 2011). The ability to move on from this economic vulnerability can give toxic leaders room to exploit their employees. The leadership in Pakistani organisations, though hierarchical and sometimes even autocratic, still does not have adequate empirical studies on toxic leadership and its impact in this context (Naseer et al., 2016; Qureshi et al., 2022). Research on leadership in Pakistan has largely centred on the concept of transcendent, transformational and transactional approaches to leadership, with less consideration of destructive leadership and coping styles of employees (Hopkinson & Aman, 2019; Javed et al., 2017). This is a matter of heightened concern for Pakistan, as evidence suggests that stress levels are increasing within the workplace environment while mental problems remain largely unaddressed due to an absence of organisational support systems and the culture of silence in the society regarding mental health issues (Imtiaz & Ahmad, 2009; Mirza, 2004).

Study Rationale

International scholarship has helped inform knowledge of the nature of toxic leadership and its consequences, but some understanding of how workers cope with and survive toxic leadership in the workplace, particularly in non-Western societies, remains underdeveloped. For one, most of the research in the field of toxic leadership has been quantitative, surveying and statistically analysing

the prevalence of toxic behaviours and the contributions toxic traits make to correlation (Erickson et al., 2015; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). These tools can be useful for uncovering connections between determinants, but they have limited utility in understanding what has actually happened to employees, their coping strategies, and the circumstances in which they cope (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring complex phenomena that are influenced by context, but which are not well studied in the literature on toxic leadership. Secondly, all research on toxic leadership has been predominantly carried out in North America and Europe, which are mainly Western and industrialised societies (Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Webster et al., 2016). This geographic concentration raises questions about the generalisability of findings to organisations with different cultural values, power structures, and institutional systems. Because culture shapes leadership expectations, acceptable management behaviour, and employee voice (House et al., 2004; Tsui et al., 2007), perceptions of toxicity resources for resilience are themselves culturally dependent, and the absence of cross-cultural studies limits the validity of existing theories beyond the settings in which they developed. Third, while the negative effects of leadership are well documented, far less attention has gone to employee agency, resilience and survival strategies (Mackey et al., 2017; Neves, 2014); much of the literature casts employees as passive victims rather than examining the active and collective ways they shape their well-being and professional identity, or resist toxic behaviour outright (Britt et al., 2016; Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Such knowledge matters not only for individual employees but for the design of organisational interventions and policy. Fourth, the intersection of toxic leadership and certain cultural particularities of Pakistani organisations, such as high power distance, collectivism, the notion of 'izzat,' the role of wasta, gender relations, and financial limitations, remains almost uncharted in the academic literature. These structural and cultural factors raise questions that remain unanswered: how they shape the manifestation of toxic leadership, how they inform employee perceptions of acceptable versus toxic behaviour, how respect for authority and family and social harmony interact with individuals' needs for dignity and autonomy, and how the coping styles Pakistani workers adopt compare with those documented in Western settings. These questions can only be addressed with a context-specific approach that is sensitive to the connotations of the organisational taxonomy prevalent within the Pakistani context. Learning about employee coping and remaining silent also has practical relevance, as it provides organisations with information-driven recommendations for interventions, interventions to build resilience, and culturally relevant solutions (Caesens et al., 2017; Kuntz et al., 2016). To develop efficient support systems, training, and institutional changes, it is crucial that HR

practitioners, OD specialists, and policymakers have an understanding of the survival skills of HR practitioners and sometimes how they flourish under these conditions.

This qualitative study aims to explain the experiences of Pakistani employees who have endured toxic leadership and how they coped with it, whether or not they found resilience. As toxic leadership experiences are both sensitive and personal, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were selected as the method of data collection in the study, as it builds rapport and gives the respondent the opportunity to share his story through his voice. The following are the aims of the research: (1) To explore and understand the awareness and experience of toxic leadership amongst Pakistani employees in terms of toxic behaviours and contexts; (2) To analyse the psychological, emotional and physiological impacts of toxic leadership on employees and their families; (3) To identify and discuss the individual and community coping mechanisms in response to toxic leadership; (4) To gain insights from cultural factors (power distance, collectivism, izzat, gender norms and wasta) in play when managing toxic leadership in organisations. This approach is particularly supported by the qualitative context that it may offer to a topic that is primarily analysed qualitatively in the West. The results shed light on the complex interplay between personal agency, cultural context, organisational systems and social support in relation to employees' experiences of toxic leadership in the workplace. Accordingly, by foregrounding voices of Pakistani workers and their experiences, the research also challenged presumptions of universality of all Western-developed notions of leadership. The study also presents practical implications as a foundation for culturally appropriate interventions, training, and support systems for employees impacted by toxic leadership experiences in Pakistani organisations and may be in others of a similar nature. The findings will be useful for human resource personnel and practitioners to help them create psychologically safe workplaces, design leadership development initiatives that directly target toxic behaviour, and contribute to organisational change initiatives to encourage accountability. By documenting these coping mechanisms, the research also offers current and future employees practical evidence that the adversity of toxic leadership can be overcome, despite the harm it causes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Toxic Leadership

Toxic leadership is a pattern of destructive behaviours demonstrated by leaders who wage war on employee well-being, organisational culture, and effectiveness through power, manipulation, and abusive behaviour (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Mehta & Maheshwari, 2013). Toxic leadership is not limited to a single case of failure; rather, it is defined by continuous behaviours that undermine employees' dignity and psychological safety (Webster et al., 2016). Included in the list of dimensions of toxic leadership are (i) abusive supervision, which entails continued hostile verbal and non-verbal behavior (Mackey et al., 2017; Tepper et al., 2017); (ii) authoritarian leadership, where employees are highly controlling and suppress the voice of followers (Schaubroeck et al., 2017); (iii) narcissistic leadership characterised by self-aggrandisement and exploitation of followers (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006); and (iv) Machiavellian leadership, characterised by manipulation and deceit (Greenbaum et al., 2017). The toxic triangle model, proposed by Padilla, Hogan and Kaiser (2007), suggests that destructive leadership emerges from the interaction of a destructive leader, susceptible followers, and a conducive environment, encompassing organisational culture, power structures, and follower responses. Examples of toxic leadership include micromanagement, favouritism, unpredictability, unreasonable workloads, and the intentional erosion of employee confidence (Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

Consequences of Toxic Leadership

The negative effects of toxic leadership are far-reaching and well documented. Meta-analytic studies reveal strong associations with employee depression, anxiety, emotional fatigue, psychological distress, and reduced well-being (Mackey et al., 2017). Continuous exposure to threatening or unpredictable behaviour depletes emotional resources, triggering burnout marked by fatigue, cynicism, and diminished professional effectiveness (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Harms et al. (2017) indicate that the influence of destructive leadership on followers' stress is stronger compared to the impact of constructive leadership, and the toxic behaviour has a disproportionate negative effect. The physical health effects may comprise increased cortisol, high blood pressure, increased cardiovascular risk, sleep disorders, headaches, and an impaired immune system (Tepper et al., 2017). These consequences spill over into the family arenas, creating work-family tensions, marital stress, and dislocated familial aggression (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). For the organisation, toxic leadership is directly associated with turnover costs, underperformance, negative publicity, reduced innovation, and

lawsuits (Schyns & Schilling, 2013).

Employee Coping Strategies

The stress and coping model separates coping into problem and emotion-oriented strategies (coping mechanisms to change the stressor and coping mechanisms to regulate the emotional response, respectively) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In relation to toxic leadership, problem-oriented solutions can be to document abusive practices, filing formal complaints, practising strategic communication, handling interactions with care, and exploring other employment (Neves, 2014). Emotion-centered strategies include cognitive reframing, emotional detachment, seeking social support, and engaging in restorative activities outside the workplace (Webster et al., 2016). Webster et al. (2016) proposed a typology that categorises responses by activity (active or passive) and direction (toward or away from the leader/organization). Active responses include confrontation, written complaints, and quitting, while passive responses include endurance, withdrawal, and psychological aloofness. Empirical studies reveal that active responses become more prevalent when employees perceive organisational support, have feasible alternatives, or are angry rather than scared (Sun et al., 2023).

Social support is considered one of the most effective coping tools, operating on the principles of emotional validation, informational guidance, instrumental support, and appraisal feedback (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Peer "survivor networks offer the much-needed validation and protection (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006), and family support provides emotional sustenance and, in some cases, financial help that helps to get out of toxic settings (Georgiadou et al., 2025). However, there is little use of professional assistance in the form of counselling, especially in non-Western societies, which is mainly due to mental-health stigma (Thoroughgood et al., 2018). Cognitive processes are also used by employees, including positive reframing, acceptance, and compartmentalisation, that is, willingly dissociating work and personal identity to minimise the negative impact on the psyche (Ashforth et al., 2000). Other people resort to meaning-making by creating stories that help them discuss their experiences as trials of character or opportunities to build resilience (Park, 2010).

Workplace Resilience and Post-Traumatic Growth

Modern research understands resilience as a dynamic process of a positive response to a negative environment rather than an attribute (Luthar et al., 2000). Sustaining or restoring psychological well-being, job functioning, and professional identity amidst contextual challenges is workplace resilience at the

individual level (King et al., 2016). The facilitating factors include psychological capital (hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism), emotional intelligence, strong professional identity, effective coping strategies, supportive relationships, and organisational policies that prevent abuse Kuntz et al. (2016); Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2015). Studies of post-traumatic growth (PTG) have shown that there are also positive changes in others who suffer extreme adversity, such as personal strength, stronger bonds, values, and appreciation of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In the context of the workplace, workers who have to deal with toxic leaders can develop better emotional self-regulation, more stable self-demarcations, enhanced conflict-management skills, and a renewed dedication to ethical leadership (Maitlis, 2020). Nevertheless, this kind of growth requires active cognitive work and social support. It is accompanied by continued distress and must never be used as an excuse to expose employees to toxic leadership (Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

Cultural Context: Pakistani Organisations

Specific cultural dynamics of toxic leadership and employee reactions to it individualise the organisational environment of Pakistan. Being a high-power distance society, Pakistan has a high prevalence of hierarchical inequality and centralised power (Hofstede, 2011). This culture erects barriers to speaking out against superiors, as it would be against cultural traditions that value respect for authority (Farh et al., 2007). Toxic behaviour excusable by low power-distance cultures can be normalised as proper leadership, and the toxic behaviour can be postponed before being identified (Omotoye & Olonade, 2025). The collectivist culture in Pakistan prioritises group harmony and family commitment over individual autonomy (Tariq & Hassan, 2024). The employees are therefore likely to tolerate unhealthy treatment to maintain relationships at work, or they may receive considerable social support from extended families that help them absorb workplace stress (Kim et al., 2008). Still, family responsibilities that require employees to be breadwinners for extended family members limit employees' agency, meaning they cannot quit toxic jobs (Khilji & Wang, 2006). The cultural theory of *izzat* (honour/respect) has a significant impact on workplace dynamics. Sustaining *izzat* means meeting social responsibilities and shunning behaviours that lead to shame (Hopkinson & Aman, 2019). Toxic leaders are committing a serious *izzat* infringement, which is not only a source of emotional suffering but also endangers social status and family honour (Bashir et al., 2011). The need to maintain *izzat* can force employees to tolerate unhealthy treatment without speaking up, because admitting victimisation can lead to even greater loss of *izzat* (Naseer et al., 2016). The concept of *wasta* (personal connections) has a strong impact on organisational decision-

making through networks of extended families and regional, educational, and political relationships (Tariq & Hassan, 2024). Toxic leaders who are strong on *wasta* might be able to escape responsibility. However, employees who have connections might have more room to fight or flee toxicity (Sarwar & Imran, 2019). The concepts of patience (*sabr*), faith in Divine wisdom (*tawakkul*), and faith in ultimate justice offer resources for coping and provide structures of meaning-making and emotional relief in Islamic faith (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015). The issue of gender is also a complex matter, and Pakistani women have to deal with workplace challenges such as discrimination, sexual harassment, and lack of access to leadership roles (Rehman & Roomi, 2012). Women who undergo toxic leadership are faced with gendered aspects of abuse and certain barriers to reporting on account of blame issues and family honour (Ali & Kramar, 2015). In Pakistan, the employment status of many employees is extremely low, social safety nets are weak, and economic inequality is high enough, creating circumstances for the workers where they cannot tolerate harmful situations at their workplace due to lack of mobility in the labour market (Qureshi et al., 2022).

Synthesis and Implications for the Study

In addition to the gaps noted, there are two additional questions this literature largely answers, specifically: how there are intersections of leadership with other marginalised identities; and how organisational systems and cultures lead to sustaining toxic leadership over time (Padilla et al., 2007). The research takes a multi-faceted approach to tackle these inadequacies, and its findings shed light on the collective lived experiences of Pakistani workers as they navigate toxic leadership, what it does to them, and how they manage to survive within their cultural context.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach and used in-depth semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences of employees in Pakistani organisational contexts in dealing with toxic leadership. An interpretivist epistemological position was used in the design, allowing for the nuances and subjectivity of participants' accounts to be revealed and highlighting the ways in which participants' experiences of toxic leadership were given meaning. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, which involved networking, alumni members and snowball sampling from initial contacts across the cities of Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. Participants were asked whether they had been subjected to toxic leadership, defined here as being exposed to abusive supervision, authoritarian control or exploitation by a direct supervisor for a minimum of six months

over the last five years in a corporate (n=10), public-sector (n=8), and NGO (n=6) organisation. The sample consisted of 14 women and 10 men from junior executive to middle-management levels of organisational hierarchy and with diverse organisational settings, gender perspectives, and positions. The data were gathered by face-to-face interviews with participants in their mother tongue, either Urdu or English Language from March to August 2024 for 60 minutes to 90 minutes each depending on the participant's choice. The literature reviewed above was used to develop an interview guide, which was iterated in two stages with the experts and pilot interviewed and some minor wording changes were made to be culturally and linguistically clear. The semi-structured interview guide investigated the definitions and their experiences of toxic leadership, the psychological and physiological effects, personal and group coping styles, the contributions of cultural factors (power distance, izzat, wasta, family obligations), organisational reactions, and the processes of resilience-building, as well as the experiences of post-traumatic growth. The interviews were recorded on audio with participants' consent and transcribed word-for-word, with translations into English provided when needed to avoid cultural subtleties. Strict ethical procedures such as the signing of informed consent, guaranteeing confidentiality, ensuring data security, and offering counselling services to participants who were identified as being distressed after the interviews. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; generating initial codes; collation of codes into candidate themes; review of candidate themes against coded extracts and full dataset to check coherence and distinctiveness; refinement and naming of themes; and production of the final analytic narrative. NVivo 12 was used to organise the initial codes into a hierarchical node structure, which supported the collation of codes into candidate themes and allowed comparison of code frequency and coverage across the corporate, public-sector, and NGO subgroups. Member checking, peer debriefing, audit trail of analytical decisions, and reflexive journaling were used to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The lead researcher's positionality as a Pakistani organisational scholar with no supervisory or reporting relationship to any participant was used to track how the researcher's own assumptions about hierarchy and authority might shape interpretation. Six major themes were identified, and each of them consists of a series of subthemes that describe the complexity of the toxic leadership experiences and the resilience of the employees working in Pakistani organisational cultures.

RESULTS

The sample comprised 24 professionals across the corporate (n=10), public (n=8), and NGO (n=6) sectors in Pakistan. Participants were 14 women and 10 men aged 26 to 56, ranging from junior executive to middle management. All had experienced toxic leadership for between six months and five years, and held between three and eighteen years of professional experience.

Thematic Analysis Overview

Iterative coding of the interview transcripts produced six overarching themes, each with several subthemes. Together, these themes capture employees' cumulative experience of toxic leadership and the steps they took to survive and build resilience within Pakistani organisations.

Theme 1: Manifestations of Toxic Leadership in Pakistani Organisations

Subtheme 1.1: Authoritarian Control and Micromanagement The respondents constantly referred to toxic leaders as those who are too controlling in their activities at work, hence undermining the autonomy of the employees. Such superiority presented itself in the form of constant surveillance, arbitrary judgment and reprimand against free thought.

"He would check my emails at 11 PM and call me asking why I hadn't responded to a client. There was no space to breathe, let alone think for yourself."

P7, Female, Corporate Sector

"Every single decision, even choosing which pen to order for the office, had to go through him. It was suffocating. He made you feel incompetent."

P15, Male, Public Sector

The culture of high power distance that had been deeply rooted in Pakistan enhanced this behaviour, as some respondents remarked that threatening such authority would be considered disrespectful.

Subtheme 1.2: Public Humiliation and Verbal Abuse The concept of public shaming came out as a form of toxic leadership that is uniquely destructive. Respondents mentioned instances of being abused in front of other employees, and some bosses have used humiliation as a management style consciously.

"A team meeting was a rude-up-or-die situation in which I would tell them what I did wrong, but it's not being about improving me; it's being about how to break me down in front of others."

P3, Female, NGO

"The verbal abuse was daily; he called me 'useless' in front of the entire department; in our culture respect is everything; this type of disrespect remains with you."

P12, Male, Corporate Sector

From these accounts, it seems that privacy matters less in this context than public humiliation does: Respect is a currency, a shared, public one, not a private one, and that withdrawal of public respect is more serious than private respect.

Subtheme 1.3: Favouritism and Nepotism The hallmark of toxic leadership was discrimination, and personal relationships, particularly familial and regional relationships, had a stronger effect when it came to choosing over merit.

"Those who worked 12 hours a day were 'invisible' or promoted regardless; my colleague who was the boss's nephew was late, leaving early."

P19, Female, Public Sector

"It is a Pakistani system: 'apna banda (our person)' is happy or not, competent or not."

P9 and Male, Corporate Sector

In such stories, favouritism was not regarded as a fluke of unfairness, but as a known way of operating, a disposition often found among those who run Pakistani businesses and address them for jobs and promotions.

Subtheme 1.4: Exploitation through Overwork Repetitively, unrealistic workloads and expectations were mentioned, which are defined by the inability to pay attention to work-life balance. Such demands were frequently justified in terms of the cultural requirement to be loyal and to make sacrifices.

"This is Pakistan, not the West; you will not be paid for overtime here until the work is completed"

P5, Female, Corporate Sector

Such a representation of overwork as a loyalty or at least reasonable demand, rather than exploitative, reveals how cultural norms of sacrifice can be leveraged to excuse exploitation that employees may be able to challenge.

Subtheme 1.5: Credit Appropriation and Scapegoating Operating under toxic leaders was habitually characterised as a situation where bad leaders attribute victory to good performers and fault their own imperfections to their peers.

"When the project succeeded, it was his vision. When it failed, I was incompetent. There was no middle ground."

P21, Male, NGO

Many cases of this kind of credit appropriation were not documented and thus required a similar lack of complaint avenues as later described under limited organisational support (Subtheme 4.3), whereby employees had little option but to endure it.

Theme 2: Psychological and Physical Impact

Subtheme 2.1: Mental Health Deterioration The respondents reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and some chronic stress, and they suffered from the physical symptoms of insomnia, headache, and digestive issues.

"I started having panic attacks on Sunday nights, knowing I had to face him on Monday. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. My doctor said it was work-related stress."

P8, Female, Corporate Sector

"I became a different person... irritable, withdrawn. My wife said I wasn't the same man she married. The toxicity followed me home."

P14, Male, Public Sector

Self-reported physical symptoms were disrupted sleep, digestive problems, and somatic tension, which correspond to the physiological stress pathways identified in the toxic leadership research (Tepper et al., 2017), and indicated that these referred to an embodied response and were not extraneous complaints from participants.

Subtheme 2.2: Erosion of Self-Confidence Damage from too much harsh leadership had a real impact on professionals' competence and self-esteem.

"Even doing simple things, I began to doubt them all, because I was so afraid of doing something wrong and making myself look foolish again."

P11, Female, NGO

"After two years of her, I really thought I was rubbish, but it was only when I did my therapy that I realised it wasn't the case."

P17, Female, Corporate Sector

The sense of distrust is not like most workplace criticisms; it is sustained and felt long after the irritable moments that caused it, and it only comes undone when the two actors engage in therapeutic or reflective processes.

Subtheme 2.3: Impact on Family and Social Life The work-related stress made its way into participants' personal lives, including relationships with their spouse, their children and extended family.

"Why is Papa always angry? I couldn't tell my kids that I was bringing the anger of our boss home with me."

P6, Male, Public Sector

This diffusion into family life is everywhere in one example, and such patterns will be discussed more fully in relation to collectivist family patterns later on, when also an impact on the employees beyond the individual is evoked.

Theme 3: Individual Coping Strategies

Subtheme 3.1: Emotional Detachment and Compartmentalisation Many participants described deliberately distancing themselves emotionally from work to protect their mental health.

"I learned to switch off. At work, I became a robot... do the task, don't think, don't feel. It was the only way to survive."

P4, Female, Corporate Sector

"I created a wall between my work self and my real self. What happened in the office stayed there. I refused to let it define me."

P22, Male, NGO

Detachment here functioned as a deliberate boundary, not withdrawal from the job itself.

Subtheme 3.2: Strategic Compliance and "Selective Battles" A pragmatic attitude emerged among the participants, as they chose to respond to the absurd requests and carefully time their own dissent.

"I learned to pick my battles. Most times, I just said, 'yes sir' and did what was asked. But on issues that really mattered, I would push back carefully."

P13, Male, Public Sector

"It is known as "tactical submission": bow your head to survive but do not break the spine."

P18, Female, Corporate Sector

"Tactical submission" captures the strategy precisely: compliance on the surface, resistance held in reserve.

Subtheme 3.3: Documentation and Evidence Collection There was a methodical compilation of communication in company contexts, particularly, which was a strategic protection.

"To protect myself because if he blamed me for doing something that I hadn't done, I had the proof."

P10, Female, Corporate Sector

Documentation gave participants a form of protection that did not depend on management taking their side.

Subtheme 3.4: Seeking External Validation To cope with devaluation at work, participants resorted to external sources of competency recognition, including professional certifications, freelance projects, and networking as means to reclaim personal competencies.

"I began doing some online courses and tried out some side projects, to remember that I could do something even if my boss told me that I couldn't."

P16, Male, Corporate Sector

Seeking validation elsewhere let participants preserve a sense of competence the workplace itself denied them.

Subtheme 3.5: Spirituality and Faith Islamic Religion was then clearly put into action as a vital survival route, and the participants slept by reciting prayers, making extracts from the Quran and the meaning of *sabr* (patience), which revealed the hidden meanings of God's plan.

"My faith kept me grounded. I would pray and remind myself that 'Allah tests those He loves.' It gave me perspective."

P2, Female, Public Sector

"I got encouraged when I heard about Prophet Yusuf (AS)' patient existence when in distress, and he was innocent, and I said to myself, 'If he was able to endure this, I'm going to be able to endure this.'"

P20, Male, NGO

Faith gave participants a framework for enduring hardship that did not depend on the workplace changing.

Theme 4: Collective and Social Support Systems

Subtheme 4.1: Peer Solidarity and "Survival Networks" An informal network of those facing similar treatment and sharing strategies emerged together to provide support to one another.

"We had a WhatsApp group, namely the 'survivors club' we called it. Just knowing others understood what I was going through made it bearable."

P1, Female, NGO

"My team was like a family to me: One member of my team would warn the other when something was not going well; when the boss was not feeling well, another member would be OK with him or her; if one of them needed some fresh air, they'd find someone else to cover for them."

P23, Male, Corporate Sector

These networks substituted informality for the protection formal channels failed to provide.

Subtheme 4.2: Family as Emotional Refuge The impact of work stress on family life is important, and family support, in particular spouse and parent-to-spouse, is a key factor in resilience.

"My husband was my anchor; he would hear me and tell me that I'm worth being listened to."

P7, Female, Corporate Sector

"Mom always told me 'Beta, that is temporary, your izzat (honour) is in your character, not in your boss.'"

P15, Male, Public Sector

Family here reframed the experience rather than simply cushioning it, separating the participant's honour from the boss's conduct.

Subtheme 4.3: Limited Organisational Support The respondents showed a lack of satisfaction with the HR departments and top management, who either ignored complaints or were on the side of the leaders, resorting to toxic behaviour.

"They told me to go to HR three times, suggesting he is 'just demanding,' not me."

P11, Female, NGO

"Your first concern, in 'Pakistani' organisations, is to protect the company, not the employee."

P19, Female, Public Sector

HR's institutional loyalty to the organisation, rather than the individual, made peer and family networks a necessity rather than a preference.

Subtheme 4.4: External Professional Help A minority of participants sought therapy or counselling, though stigma around mental health in Pakistan made this challenging.

"I had to meet with a therapist once, but when I told people I was going to a 'life coach,' they thought I was crazy. The stigma is real."

P17, Female, Corporate Sector

Stigma, not access, was the barrier here, which is why so few participants pursued this route at all.

Theme 5: Resilience Building and Post-Traumatic Growth

Subtheme 5.1: Development of Emotional Intelligence Participants shared how they gained more awareness and emotion regulation as a result of their experiences.

"I learned to read people, I learned to manage my emotions, I learned how to be calm in chaos, I am going to take these skills with me for life."

P4, Female, Corporate Sector

"I've learned how to detach from feeling and put the emotion aside from what I'm doing, taught me emotional discipline I was not having before in the toxic environment."

P12, Male, Corporate Sector

This is not about coping in the moment; participants define a sustainable practice which continues beyond the workday.

Subtheme 5.2: Clarification of Personal Values and Boundaries The period of toxic leadership led to introspection on values and professional lines.

"There's a mindset I formed of never treating people like I'm treated, and it really stuck with me. It became a kind of mindset to be the kind of leader I wanted to be."

P8, Female, Corporate Sector

"That I have learned where I would draw my line, and what I would and would not accept, and it is strong."

P21, Male, NGO

The term 'Boundary-setting' is used in a paragraph in terms of an enduring change in identity, not a situational adjustment.

Subtheme 5.3: Enhanced Career Agency Participants acquired a more active approach to career management, including networking, skill development, and strategizing a job search.

"Well, I felt I should change my career path, updated my CV, expanded my network and made an effort to seek out

opportunities... I just didn't sit back faithfully and wait for things to get better."

P10, Female, Corporate Sector

"That job taught me that loyalty to a bad boss is foolishness. Now I'm strategic about my career moves."

P24, Male, Public Sector

The career changes that resulted in this type of career agency have outlasted the job that triggered them, and reduce it to a coping response that is more immediate and is addressed under Theme 3.

Subtheme 5.4: Advocacy and Mentorship Several participants developed into advocates for a healthier work environment and became mentors to others in similar situations.

"But when I see a person struggling, I go and help them; I share my story; if I can just make one person feel less alone, it's worth doing."

P3, Female, NGO

Mentoring others is a transformative experience beyond that of personal recovery, because it's not just about healing, it's also about helping others recover.

Theme 6: Cultural and Contextual Factors Unique to Pakistan

Subtheme 6.1: Power Distance and Hierarchy Pakistan's high power-distance culture made challenging toxic leaders particularly difficult, with authority rarely questioned.

"In our culture, it's like asking a question to the boss is the same as asking a question to your father. It's so ingrained in us."

P9, Male, Corporate Sector

"Even though he might be wrong, he would have been respected because of 'izzat,' respect/honour of the elders and the authority. I believe it is complicated."

P5, Female, Corporate Sector

Framing authority in familial terms, as P9 does, showed why challenging a boss carried the same weight as challenging a parent.

Subtheme 6.2: Collectivism vs. Individual Agency Pakistani society had a collectivist character which gave rise to conflicts between individual well-being and group harmony.

"I wanted to leave, but my family required my salary in Pakistan; you do not make decisions only for yourself; you have obligations."

P14 Male, Public Sector

"For the family, you have to sacrifice; you have to live through the pain for the good of the family."

P11, Female, NGO

Both accounts describe staying not as resignation but as a deliberate choice weighed against family obligation.

Subtheme 6.3: Gender Dynamics In addition to the difficulties associated with gender discrimination and cultural expectations, female participants had other difficulties.

"As a woman, I had to work twice as hard to prove myself, and even then, he would dismiss my ideas until a male colleague repeated them."

P7, Female, Corporate Sector

"The harassment wasn't just professional; there were inappropriate comments and invasion of personal space. As a woman in Pakistan, speaking up felt impossible."

P17, Female, Corporate Sector

These accounts show gender adding a distinct layer of constraints on top of the power-distance dynamics already described.

Subtheme 6.4: Limited Labour Mobility Economics and a competitive employment market restricted participants' capability to leave the wrong environments.

"There is hardly any job available in Pakistan; if something goes wrong you can't just give up, otherwise you do not have food to eat!"

P6, Male, Public Sector

"The economy is tough. Everyone knows that, including toxic bosses. They exploit it. 'Where will you go?' they say. And they're often right."

P19, Female, Public Sector

Toxic leaders here were not merely tolerated by economic necessity but appeared to actively rely on it.

Subtheme 6.5: Role of "Wasta" (Connections) The contexts of personal connections in Pakistani professional culture enabled and limited responses to the toxic leadership.

"He had a connection with the board. When I complained, I could not get anywhere, and he got all protected. This is how it is here."

P23, Male, Corporate Sector

"I transferred to another department myself, knowing who to call, and if not for that wasta, I would still be there."

P16, Male, Corporate Sector

The same mechanism, personal connection, protected the leader in one account and freed the employee in the other, underscoring the dual role wasta plays.

Summary of Findings

The intensive thematic analysis led to a multifaceted picture of the toxic expression of leadership in Pakistani organisations, shaped and determined by various cultural, economic and structural aspects. The range of personal and group coping strategies they employed was along the lines of Detachment, Strategic Compliance in Emotions, and Faith as well as Peer Support. Despite the psychological harm caused by toxic leadership, participants showed both resilience and, for many, post-traumatic growth: an elevated emotional intelligence, a more consistent sense of personal boundaries, and a stronger sense of professional agency. Toxic leadership and employees' adaptive responses take a distinct shape in Pakistan because of power distance,

collectivist culture, gender relationships, and the significance of personal connections. The findings thus emphasise a clear lack of organisational support and provide some indication of the need for culturally responsive interventions that recognise and respond to the distinct dilemmas these employees are facing.

DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

The empirical results of this research may be used to explain the complex balance between the expressions of toxic leadership and coping mechanisms of the employees in the background of the unique cultural-organisational environment in Pakistan. Participants in Theme 1, particularly under authoritarian control and micromanagement, described toxic behaviour as difficult to name as such, since high power distance normalised deference to supervisors regardless of how those supervisors behaved. This implied that toxic leadership in Pakistani workplaces is allowed to operate in the sense that the employees of such organisations have a reduced capacity to perceive the same behaviour as toxic, as compared to a Western context where the elements of the behaviour are easier to be called out (Omotoye & Olonade, 2025). The same pattern was applied to public humiliation (Subtheme 1.2); all of these participants said that public humiliation was particularly hurtful, since it endangered not only their own honour or prestige, but the honour, or *izzat*, of their families. The findings have enabled the concept of *izzat* to be stretched beyond its current context of work hierarchy to understand how employees think and recall certain acts of mistreatment (Hopkinson & Aman, 2019). Under subtheme 6.5, participants talked about *wasta* being a two-way street in its enforcement of impunity for toxic leaders: one participant's grievance was ignored because the toxic one had a "connection to the board", and another's complaint had been made to a person on the board who had a "connection with the board" for the toxic leader. This also helps to support (Naseer et al., 2016) focus on the impact of destructive leadership through informal power arrangements and extends it by demonstrating that informal power structures can also help to support employees working with that power. The psychological and physical effects reported here, anxiety, insomnia, and the erosion of self-confidence described under Theme 2, are consistent with the international literature (Mackey et al., 2017; Tepper et al., 2017). What the collectivist settings add is the scale of the spillover: participants such as P6, whose children asked why he was "always angry," described carrying workplace stress into extended family relationships rather than a single household. The research findings expand the study of work-to-family spillover by showing that collectivist commitments magnify the spillover of workplace toxicity into larger social circles (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). Agency restrictions were offset through coping strategies that demonstrated considerable creativity. Emotional detachment,

strategic compliance, and selective battles are widespread signs of adaptive behaviour in settings where a direct attack may result in serious retaliation (Webster et al., 2016). Religious coping, described under Subtheme 3.5 through participants' references to Sabr, Tawakkul, and the example of Prophet Yusuf's endurance, functioned as a resource largely absent from Western-derived coping frameworks. Its prominence in participants' own accounts, rather than as a secondary or residual category, suggests that culturally informed models of resilience need to treat religious coping as central rather than supplementary (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015). The creation of peer groups for survival further validates the buffering effect of social support and the organisational failure to offer formal support mechanisms (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Post-traumatic growth experiences, such as the development of emotional intelligence, stronger values, and strengthened ethical commitments, can fit within the framework proposed by Maitlis (2020) and demonstrate that growth does not exclude the persistence of distress, but rather that it can be accompanied by harm. Notably, the participants' development did not occur because of, but despite, toxic leadership, which confirms that organizational responsibility lay in prevention, which confirms that organisational responsibility lies in prevention, not in employee resilience compensating for poor leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study's contribution lies in reframing employee response to toxic leadership as culturally embedded and constrained agency, rather than passive endurance, closing key gaps in qualitative and cross-cultural research in a non-Western context. The results show that although the negative influence of toxic leadership is not limited by culture, the expression, perception, and style of managing culture are strongly mediated by cultural values, the power system, economic limitations, and social systems. Tactical submission, selective resistance, documentation, peer networks, and religious coping show how this constrained agency operates in practice, individually and collectively. However, this survival ability must not cloud the organisational and social roles in eliminating toxic leadership. Cultural aspects of power distance, izzat, wasta, collectivism, and faith are both limitations and an asset that need to be considered when developing context-sensitive interventions.

Policy and Institutional Recommendations

Organisational Level: Pakistani institutions should create anonymous, third-party grievance channels to help break the cultural barriers to reporting toxic dynamics. To prevent toxic behaviours from taking root, HR curricula should

incorporate instruction in recognising the presence or absence of culturally specific toxic behaviours, along with comparisons of legitimate authority and potentially abusive forms of authority. Performance evaluation processes must include 360 degree feedback and give consideration to leader behaviours, group welfare as well as productivity. Further, enforced training of leaders in Islamic moral principles opposed to the neo-liberal oppressive dictatorship as a way of deifying self, that can accommodate the Islamic moral disciplines through servant-leadership, should be institutionalised.

Institutional Level: To include, for example, clear guidelines for toxic behaviours with clear consequences, including professional penalties, established by professional associations and business federations. As a core component of competences, mission, existence, and corporate responsibility, business schools and universities should try to incorporate knowledge and competences on ethical leadership, emotional intelligence and organisational psychology in their curricula, so that future leaders are able to spot and prevent toxicity. The laws should be enacted to give real protection against a man's abuse in the workplace; tribunals should be able to rule based on evidence of prejudice without relying on a handshake.

Support Systems: Mental health practitioners and organisations can work together to deliver confidential, culturally appropriate Employee Assistance Programmes which provide access to psychological services without stigmatisation. The survival networks participants described may be embodied through peer mentoring programmes, and secondly, may create believable opportunities for peer support and advocacy for healthier work organisations.

Limitations and Future Research

This research carries several limitations: retrospective recall may have introduced bias, the sample was geographically concentrated in major urban centres with no representation of rural organisations, and self-selection favoured employees who had survived experiences of toxic leadership. A cross-sectional design does not allow the capture of temporal dynamics in the evolution of coping strategies or in the trajectories of long-term resilience.

Future studies need to adopt longitudinal designs to measure employees' coping and well-being over time, investigate the efficacy of organisational interventions in Pakistani settings, and understand cross-marginalised experiences of employees. Research on toxic leadership in rural and informal-sector organisations, and comparative research across South Asian countries, can identify region- and country-specific trends. Studies examining toxic leaders' own perspectives, and the organisational structures that sustain toxicity, would support

structural reform. Evidence-based support for workers who are going through toxic leadership in collectivist, high power-distance settings could be informed by intervention studies that examine culturally adapted resilience programmes.

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