

# Fire in the belly: the impact of despotic leadership on employees work-related outcomes in the hospitality setting

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Building on conservation of resources theory and unfolding theory of turnover, this paper aims to propose a model of the effects of despotic leadership on employees' job satisfaction and turnover intention in the hospitality industry. In this model, the authors theorize psychological distress to play an intervening role among the aforesaid linkages.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The data were collected in three-waves from 212 employees working in Palestinian restaurants. A covariance-based matrix in structural equation modeling was used to verify the proposed linkages in the study. A marker variable was used to control the common method bias.

**Findings** – The results showed that despotic leadership has a direct negative effect on job satisfaction and a positive indirect effect on turnover intentions. Besides, psychological distress showed to play significant mediating effects among the aforementioned relationships.

**Practical implications** – This study gives insights to the hospitality industry on how despotic leadership can be destructive and lead to negative consequences.

**Originality/value** – This study is unique, as it is the first study conducted on despotic leadership in a hospitality setting. The study responded to scholarly calls made to enrich the literature pertaining to despotic leadership and its outcomes.

**Keywords** Despotic leadership, Psychological distress, Job satisfaction, Restaurants, Turnover intention, Restaurant industry, Staff turnover, Non-western sample

**Paper type** Research paper



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## Introduction

To achieve customer loyalty and satisfaction (Kim *et al.*, 2014) and better service delivery in the hospitality industry, it is paramount that there is a quality relationship between hospitality employees and their supervisors (Chon and Zoltan, 2019). As the relationship between the leader and his employees is of utmost importance in the hospitality sector (Yu *et al.*, 2020), hospitality scholars have been interested to show the effects of positive leadership styles on hospitality employees. Those include servant leadership (Karatepe *et al.*, 2020; Ye *et al.*, 2019), transformational leadership (Gui *et al.*, 2020; Patiar and Wang, 2016), empowering leadership (Chiang and Chen, 2020) and authentic leadership (Kaya and Karatepe, 2020; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2020; Wang and Xie, 2020). Recently, hospitality research has shifted toward examining the dark side of leadership (Zhao and Guo, 2019) because of its negative effects on employees and organizations alike (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2021b). A possible explanation of this shift is the higher levels of burnout, turnover and decreased degrees of motivation and satisfaction reported among hospitality employees (Hight *et al.*, 2019), resulting from destructive leadership or toxic leadership (Mathieu and Babiak, 2016).

The cost associated with destructive leadership is estimated at US\$23.8bn annually, affecting 13.6% of employees in the USA (Tepper, 2007). Such leadership behaviors are most likely unavoidable in the hospitality industry, where mistreatment of employees is common because of the hierarchical and centralized structures of hospitality organizations (Yu *et al.*, 2020). These leadership styles (e.g. abusive leadership, despotic leadership, etc.) can be very harmful to employees because they are characterized by manipulation, information distortion and corruption (Raja *et al.*, 2020).

In hospitality, when discussing destructive leadership styles, studies have examined different leadership styles such as narcissistic leadership (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2021b), leaders from hell (Hight *et al.*, 2019), abusive leadership (Zhao and Guo, 2019; Shum *et al.*, 2020) and destructive leadership (Nyberg *et al.*, 2011). In comparison to these styles, despotic leadership is considered to be the most destructive and self-centered style among other dark leadership styles (Naseer *et al.*, 2016). An important difference between despotic leadership and other forms of negative leadership styles is that despotic leadership explicitly entails a lack of morality displayed by the leader toward employees (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008). Despotic leaders' morally corrupt and self-serving actions not only mislead and deceive employees but also often jeopardize employees' well-being and the organization's interests (Naseer *et al.*, 2016). Exploitive leaders, for instance, may oblige employees to meet the required job requirements, whereas leaders with despotic tendencies expect employees to exhibit excessive obedience (Naseer *et al.*, 2016) for the sake of realizing their own self-interests (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008). Other styles which are characterized by high degrees of authoritarianism (e.g. abusive leadership) or ego-nurturing behavior (e.g. narcissistic leadership) may even benefit the organization to attain its overall goals (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2021b; Tepper, 2000). On the contrary, the complete obedience requested by despotic leaders increases employees' fears regarding their inability to meet the job demands and performance targets (Naseer *et al.*, 2016), which can deteriorate the organizational performance. Therefore, despotic leadership takes place when the leader exhibits immoral behavior, is high self-centered, vengeful, exploitative, authoritarian and prioritizes his own interests over employees for personal gains (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008).

A review of the management and leadership literature suggests that despotic leadership exerts a negative influence on employees creativity, citizenship behaviors, job performance (Naseer *et al.*, 2016), psychological well-being (Raja *et al.*, 2020) and work-life balance (Nauman *et al.*, 2018) and positively predicts employees' work withdrawal (Nauman *et al.*, 2020),

emotional exhaustion (Nauman *et al.*, 2018), employees' bullying behavior (Syed *et al.*, 2020) and organizational conspiracy theory (Van Prooijen and De Vries, 2016). Although despotic leadership started to receive attention from management and leadership scholars, despotic leadership in hospitality remains an unexplored area. To the best knowledge of the authors, there are no previous studies that explore the negative consequences of despotic leadership in a hospitality context.

To fill in these voids, this research proposes a model of the effects of despotic leadership behaviors on employees' job satisfaction and turnover intention considering the mediating effects of psychological distress. This research advances the literature in several ways. First, although studies on despotic leadership have flourished in the past decade in management research, this is the first study conducted on despotic leadership in the hospitality industry. We also respond to the scholarly call made by Naseer *et al.* (2016) to conduct more research on despotic leadership in order to provide a holistic understanding of the negative consequences of this leadership style. Surprisingly, empirical studies pertaining to the impact of despotic leadership on employees' work outcomes are relatively scarce (De Clercq *et al.*, 2018). Besides, this study responds to the call made by Gentry *et al.* (2014) to investigate destructive leadership in non-western contexts. We do so by examining the outcomes of despotic leadership using data coming from employees working in Palestinian restaurants.

Second, we provide a holistic understating of what drives psychological distress, job satisfaction and turnover intentions in the hospitality setting. For instance, job satisfaction is a very important factor in the hospitality setting because it impacts customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and perceived service quality (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015). On another note, it is very important to uncover the antecedents of turnover intention in the hospitality setting as the industry faces high turnover. Higher turnover levels in hospitality are alarming because they result in lower productivity levels, disruptions in teamwork and a decrease in service quality (Tews and Stafford, 2020). Economically speaking, high turnover increases hospitality organizations' costs in terms of recruitment, selection and providing industry-specific training (International Labour Organization, 2010). Notably, Jang and Kandampully (2018) have highlighted that the hospitality industry suffers from this problem more than any other industry. Therefore, given the gravity of employees turnover and its negative impact on the hospitality industry, there is a dire need to address the underlying factors that are associated with turnover intention among employees. In the same line of inquiry, Park and Min (2020) called for more studies to identify the reasons associated with turnover intention in hospitality.

Similarly, it is of utmost importance to shed light on what causes psychological distress among hospitality employees. This is because service quality can be negatively influenced by the elevated levels of stress among hospitality employees. In addition, stress among hospitality employees can lead to physiological symptoms such as heart attacks and strokes, blood pressure, ulcers, indigestion, fatigue and headaches (Krone *et al.*, 1989) which will ultimately lead to devastating consequences. Such consequences can include a decrease in employee effectiveness (Gilmour and Patten, 2007), a drop in creativity level (Dunnagan *et al.*, 2001) and an increase in health-care costs (O'Neill and Davis, 2011). To this end, and in line with the scholarly call made by Cole *et al.* (2010) to conduct more in-depth research to understand the antecedents of psychological distress using non-western samples, this research contributes as well to psychological distress literature in hospitality settings.

### **Hypotheses development**

A despotic leader is described as an authoritative, vengeful, controlling, dominating person who prioritizes his own interests over employees' interests (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008). Unlike other forms of negative leadership, a despotic leader unequivocally

and inevitably exhibits lower levels of moral standards toward employees (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008). Naseer *et al.* (2016) stated that despotic leaders behave egoistically and selfishly, demand submissiveness, obedience and maintain a power-distanced relationship by solidifying power to exploit and manipulate their employees for their personal gains. Such behaviors are demonstrated to have negative effects on employees' outcomes and can deteriorate organizational commitment, organizational performance and job satisfaction (Schyns and Schilling, 2013; Tepper, 2000; Nauman *et al.*, 2018).

In the management literature, job satisfaction is viewed as one of the most studied job attitudes (Jung and Takeuchi, 2018). Job satisfaction is mainly concerned with the employees' positive attitudes toward their job (Kong *et al.*, 2018; Navajas-Romero *et al.*, 2020). This attitude weighs more importance in the hospitality sector because satisfied employees help in building brand image and improve customer satisfaction (Navajas-Romero *et al.*, 2020). Although job satisfaction has been widely studied, an agreed upon definition does not exist. Therefore, we adopt the most cited definition in the literature by Spector (1997), who indicated that job satisfaction reflects how people feel about their jobs.

In this research, we predict that despotic leadership behaviors will negatively influence employees' job satisfaction for the following motives. First, previous research in hospitality has shown that employees who encounter abusive behaviors tend to show greater levels of job dissatisfaction (Pan *et al.*, 2018). When employees experience hostile treatment from their supervisors, they tend to develop higher levels of depression and a lower sense of belonging to the workplace (Ouyang *et al.*, 2015). Second, based on the stressor-strain perspective, despotic leadership can be seen as interpersonal stress, which will ultimately lead to negative short-term and long-term strain effects (Harris *et al.*, 2013). Third, the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014; Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) can serve as an effective framework to understand the link between despotic leadership and job satisfaction. Based on the COR theory, employees seek to obtain, retain, protect and foster valuable resources. Such resources are important, as they help employees in achieving their goals and preventing further loss of resources (Jolly and Self, 2020). These resources are subject to depletion because of workplace stressors, amelioration via investing in other resources or strategic compensation through a withholding effort (Hobfoll, 1989). Under the umbrella of COR theory, employees as a result of stressors (i.e. despotic leadership) try to reduce the loss of their resources (Hobfoll, 2001). That is, employees who are subject to despotic leadership behaviors tend to protect their valuable resources through different mechanisms (i.e. silence) to isolate themselves from the work. Prolonged isolation can lead to a sense of losing control of their own jobs, which will ultimately diminish their motivation and other positive work attitudes, such as job satisfaction (Wang *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, when employees experience a despotic leader who is abusive, highly self-centered, vengeful, exploitative, authoritarian and prioritizes his own interests over followers' interests (Naseer *et al.*, 2016), this causes stress among followers (Nauman *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, the resources that employees lose because of psychological distress can also lead to a decrease in their job satisfaction. In conclusion, while job satisfaction is expected to regenerate and maintain an employee's mental and emotional resources, despotic leadership will result in increased threat and more depletion of resources, with immediate unfavorable consequences such as lower job satisfaction and long-lasting detrimental consequences on employees' health and well-being. Hence, we posit the following hypothesis:

*H1.* Despotic leadership will be negatively associated with job satisfaction.

Turnover intention is referred to when an employee is willing to leave the organization (Hwang *et al.*, 2014). Employees' voluntary turnover has been acknowledged in the literature

as a salient managerial issue that results from shock (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). There exist several reasons both outside and/or within organizations that can cause shock in employees such as the negative behavior of supervisors at the workplace (Jo and Ellingson, 2019). Indeed, evidence substantiates the claims that employee turnover is detrimental for organizations (International Labour Organization, 2010) and hence, it is of utmost necessity to understand the factors that drive turnover intention (Saleem *et al.*, 2018).

Contrary to the positive effects of leadership in reducing turnover intention (Jang and Kandampully, 2018), despotic leadership contributes to increasing the likelihood of an employee's intention to leave because of its destructive, abusive and highly self-centered behavior (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008). In general, the literature falls short on empirically testing the links between negative leadership styles and turnover intention (Pradhan *et al.*, 2019). More specifically, we have found no study that empirically examined the impact of despotic leadership on employees' turnover intention in the hospitality setting. We argue in this research that despotic leadership contributes to turnover intention. First, the unfolding theory of turnover (Lee and Mitchell, 1994) may aid in explaining the aforesaid linkage. According to this theory, employees follow several paths to quit their jobs. Those may include shock, pre-planned response to a shock or image violation (Lee and Mitchell, 1994). In the context of the present research, we propose despotic leadership as a shock to employees. According to Pradhan *et al.* (2019), employees are more likely to leave when they experience a shock in terms of destructive behaviors from their supervisors. This is because employees feel intimidated, humiliated, disgraced and traumatized. Therefore, as far as employees experience a shock represented by the destructive and punitive behavior of the leader, they will activate their volition to leave the organization. Second, drawing upon the COR theory, when employees face resource-draining work conditions (despotic behaviors), they select how to use their energy based on their drive to safeguard their current resource pool to minimize further resource losses (Hobfoll, 1989; Jolly and Self, 2020). Consequently, turnover intention offers these employees the means of counteracting the depletion of their resources (De Clercq, 2021; Hobfoll, 2001) and a way to release frustration to protect their self-esteem resources (Firth *et al.*, 2004). Finally, in hospitality, turnover intention appeared to be positively impacted by abusive leadership behaviors (Tews and Stafford, 2020; Xu *et al.*, 2018). Given the previous discussion, we propose that:

## H2. Despotic leadership will be positively associated with turnover intention.

Psychological distress is described as negative feelings and thoughts related to depression, fear or anxiety (Tepper, 2000). Stress among hospitality employees is caused by both external and internal factors. In the case of the former, a study by Kim *et al.* (2014) revealed that hospitality employees' stress is positively influenced by the customers' incivility. Among the other causes, researchers have found that negative leadership styles influence psychological distress (Restubog *et al.*, 2011). On the link between despotic leadership and psychological distress, we argue the following. First, a stressful stimulus such as despotic leadership may be interpreted as a toxic environment, triggering a stress response that ultimately results in mental arousal. Thus, when employees are subject to shock or traumatic situations, such as elevated levels of despotic behaviors, they are more likely to develop anxiety, fear and depression, all of which are symptoms of psychological distress. Furthermore, the COR theory can be seen as an effective mechanism to uncover the link between despotic leadership and psychological distress. The theory postulates that resources loss is more powerful than resources gain (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2014), where the former can lead to elevated psychological distress (Hobfoll, 2001). That is, despotic leadership can be viewed as resource-demanding because it not only depletes employees'

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resources but also demands actions on their part to manage such resources by queuing up other important resources to compensate for the consequences of despotic leadership. Thus, employees who experience despotic leadership may feel threatened to lose further resources and need to exert more psychological efforts to handle their leader's behavior (Wu and Hu, 2009), resulting in elevated levels of psychological distress (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Finally, the existing literature backs up the claim that employees who experience destructive leadership styles from their supervisors are more likely to develop emotional arousal and experience psychological distress (Nauman *et al.*, 2018). Based on the previously discussed arguments, we posit that:

*H3.* Despotic leadership will be positively associated with psychological distress.

Hon and Chan (2013) argue that if employees face challenge-oriented (good) stress, they are more likely to get satisfied. On the other hand, hindrance-oriented (bad) stress is destructive and can cause employees to develop negative outcomes such as job dissatisfaction and turnover intention and negatively affect their performance and commitment (Beheshtifar *et al.*, 2011). In this research, we argue that psychological distress can reduce job satisfaction among employees. According to Anasori *et al.* (2020), psychological distress positively contributes to emotional exhaustion. This, in turn, leads to negative work-related outcomes, including lower levels of engagement, absenteeism and lower levels of job satisfaction (Borritz *et al.*, 2006; Hakanen *et al.*, 2006). In hospitality, Kong *et al.* (2018) pointed out that psychological issues that employees face at the workplace can affect their job satisfaction. Empirical research in this direction shows that stress is negatively related to hospitality employees' job satisfaction (O'Neill and Davis, 2011; Hon and Chan, 2013). Therefore, we expect that psychological distress among hospitality employees caused by destructive leadership behavior will hamper their job satisfaction.

On another note, Park and Min (2020) argued that stress is a major factor that is related to hospitality employees' intention to leave. In this regard and building on the COR theory, we argue that when employees' resources in terms of energy and time are more likely to be expended in an effort to deal with psychological distress, this in turn, will push employees to engage in defensive or withdrawal coping strategies, such as developing the intention to leave to shield themselves from further loss of resources (Lapointe *et al.*, 2011). To conclude, employees who need to expend extra psychological efforts to deal with workplace stressors, they are subject to depletion of their emotional resources, which will ultimately increase their emotional exhaustion (Ahmad and Begum, 2020). Under such circumstances, employees will develop a feeling of job dissatisfaction and an intention that they quit their jobs. Thus, we posit that:

*H4.* Psychological distress will be negatively associated with job satisfaction.

*H5.* Psychological distress will be positively associated with turnover intention.

In the previous discussion, we viewed despotic leadership behavior as a workplace stressor and a shock to employees as they encounter a leader who is abusive, authoritarian, punitive, vengeful, exploitative, asks for complete obedience and has no compassion or tolerance. According to COR theory, employees acquire new resources, including mental, psychological or physical resources, which they may use to cope with stressful situations (Hobfoll, 2001). Furthermore, the theory indicates that distress arises as people face the possibility of a loss of resources or a lack of resource benefit, making them vulnerable to lose remaining resources (Hobfoll, 1989). As despotic leadership represents a workplace stressor, employees will suffer from resource loss and the lack of resources gain (Schyns and Schilling, 2013). Consequently, employees will experience an emotional imbalance and depleted social resources, which will not only make them more psychologically distressed but also make it difficult for them

to identify with their organizations (Anasori *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, employees respond to such stressful situations by engaging in unfavorable work outcomes to protect against the loss of their remaining resources (Hobfoll, 1989). This may include developing negative work outcomes, disengaging and finally withdrawing from work (Park and Min, 2020). Finally, when an employee develops a dwindling sense of identity due to the work stressor represented by despotic leadership, this employee will have a substantial drain of the emotional resources and finally exhibit negative work outcomes to shield the remaining resources from further loss. Given the previous discussion, we predict that when hospitality employees are exposed to despotic leadership behavior, this, in turn, triggers psychological distress that, successively, will have a negative impact on their job satisfaction and a positive impact on their intention to leave. Therefore, we posit that:

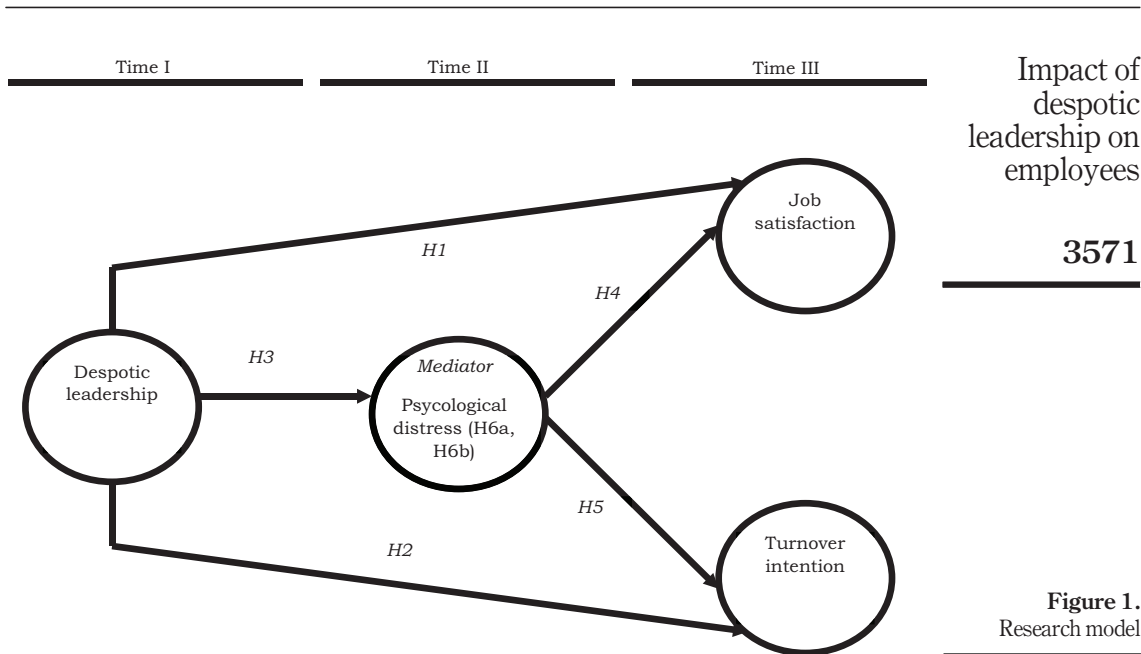
- H6. Psychological distress will mediate the relationships between despotic leadership and job satisfaction and despotic leadership and turnover intention.

### Methods

Three-wave data were gathered from employees working in local restaurants in Palestine run as family businesses. In general, the service sector in Palestine (including hotels, restaurants and tourism) is a significant contributor to the Palestinian economy. Therefore, studying destructive leadership (despotic leadership) and its outcomes within this sector is of great importance because employees' attitudes can affect the customers' experience and satisfaction (Jung and Yoon, 2013). This study is necessary as it provides insights to restaurants managers on the destructive effects of despotic leadership not only on employees' attitudes but also on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Given the lack of a defined population frame of the number of Palestinian restaurants, the authors used convenience sampling to reach the respondents. This sampling strategy is widely adopted in hospitality research (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2021a; Koc and Boz, 2020). A total of 212 employees working in 53 large-size restaurants were willing to participate in the study. Data collection started in November 2019 and was completed in December 2020. These restaurants allowed the researcher to contact directly with employees to collect data. The researcher relied on the drop-off and pick-method to collect the data, as this method is recommended to enhance the response rate. The survey was translated from English to Arabic using the back-translation method, as Arabic is the official language used at the Palestinian workplace (Aboramadan, 2020). Before distributing the survey, it was subject to a pilot study with 35 employees to check the readability and feasibility of the scales translated. The outcome of this pilot study resulted in no significant changes. In the first wave, 318 questionnaires were distributed and the researcher was able to obtain 230 filled surveys on employees' perception of despotic leadership. Two weeks later, in the second wave, employees assessed psychological distress. Two weeks later, in the third wave, employees assessed their attitudes in terms of job satisfaction and turnover intention (Figure 1) and the researcher was able to receive 215 surveys. Out of these 215, 3 surveys were eliminated due to missing information. This represented a 66.67% response rate. Table 1 presents information on the participants.

During the data collection phase, employees were provided with codes to allow the researcher to match the surveys. A cover letter was attached with each questionnaire which included general information on the research, the researcher's information and a statement that assured the participants that the questionnaire is conducted only for academic purposes and personal information will not be used or shared. In addition, the survey was participant-friendly, short in which it could be filled in 10–12 min and employees were requested to insert their surveys in an envelope to assure their confidentiality.



### Constructs

Scales of despotic leadership, job satisfaction and turnover intention were assessed via a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Psychological distress was assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time).

*Despotic leadership*: This construct was assessed using the six-item scale developed by De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008). A sample item was “my supervisor is punitive; has no pity or compassion.” The internal reliability value was 0.940.

Variable	Frequency	(%)	Frequency	(%)
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Nature of the job</i>	
Male	204	96.2	Part time	84
Female	8	3.8	Full time	128
<i>Age</i>			<i>Experience</i>	
less than 25	66	31.1	1 to less than 3	86
25 to less than 30	65	30.7	3 to less than 6	40
30 to less than 35	59	27.8	6 to less than 9	57
40 or more	22	10.4	9 years and above	29
<i>Education</i>			<i>Job position</i>	
Less than high school	17	8.02	Food serving	80
High school	27	12.74	Cook	50
Diploma	80	37.74	Cleaning	20
BA	80	37.74	Accountant	40
Master	8	3.77	Argileh server	22
				10.38

**Table 1.**  
Respondents profile



*Psychological distress:* This construct was measured using the six-item scale K-6 promoted by Kessler *et al.* (2002) and used by Kessler *et al.* (2010). Sample items were “During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel worthless?” and “During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel nervous?”. The internal reliability value was 0.909.

*Job satisfaction:* We measured this construct using the 3-item MOAQ-JSS scale developed by Cammann *et al.* (1979). A sample item was “In general, I like working here.” The internal consistency was 0.842.

*Turnover intention:* This was gauged using a 3-item scale used by Skelton *et al.* (2020) based on the model of turnover of Mobley *et al.* (1978). A sample item was “I often think of leaving the organization.” The internal reliability was 0.809.

*Supervisor religiosity (Marker variable):* Following Aboramadan and Karatepe (2021), we used one item to assess the levels of supervisor religiosity in terms of praying. The literature suggests that religiosity does not necessarily predict pro-social behavior (Shariff, 2015) and unhealthy leadership styles are universal and not necessarily religious (McCormack *et al.*, 2014). Respondents assessed this scale on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (indicating no religiosity at all) to 5 (indicating high levels of supervisor religiosity).

*Control variables:* In this research, we control for industrial experience and the nature of the job, as these may influence the mediating and the outcome variables.

### Statistical analysis strategy

Before choosing the appropriate statistical analysis technique, we have examined the data normality for our study variables. The skewness and kurtosis in this study were found between  $-1$  and  $+1$ . Given these results, the assumption of data normality was assured (George, 2011). Therefore, the maximum likelihood technique was used using the R software (The Lavaan Package). In the analysis, different techniques were used to ensure the validity and reliability of the used methods. These were as follows: average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), maximum shared variance (MSV) and average shared variance (ASV). The maximum likelihood method (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988) was used in confirmatory factor analysis and structural model. To check for mediation effects, the 5,000-sample bootstrapping bias-corrected technique was used at a confidence interval (CI) of 95%.

### Common method bias

In this research, we have followed the measures recommended by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003) to overcome common method bias. First, to avoid complicated wording, the items were pre-tested and revised to avoid confusion among respondents. Second, respondents were asked to answer the questions with a high level of honesty and they were assured that there were no right or wrong responses. Third, Harman’s single factor test was used. The analysis showed a single factor did not provide an explanation of the majority of the variance. The reported value of this test (41.0%) was below the value of 50% recommended by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003). Fourth, our data were collected in three waves. Finally, a marker variable “supervisor religiosity in terms of praying” that is not theoretically linked to the study variables was used following the procedure suggested by Lindell and Whitney (2001). The results in the correlation matrix suggest that the marker variable did not correlate with any of the study’s variables, providing another evidence that the data in our study are not contaminated by common method variance.

### Measurement model

The findings of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) showed the data fit well with the hypothesized model ( $\chi^2 = 294.98$ ,  $df = 123$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.398$ , comparative fit index (CFI) =

0.939; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.924; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.081; and standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] = 0.054). Moreover, our results suggested the superiority of the hypothesized model over other competing models. For instance, CFA of a single factor showed a poor fit of the data ( $\chi^2 = 1,447.65$ ,  $df = 135$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.398$ , CFI = 0.535; TLI = 0.473; RMSEA = 0.214; and SRMR = 0.158).

The findings of the CFA suggested the inclusion of all the items associated with each scale as the standardized loading for all items was significant and higher than 0.60. In addition, the AVE and CR values were calculated (Table 2). According to the results, the values of AVE

Variable	Item	Loading	Z-stat	AVE	CR	MSV	ASV
<i>Despotic leadership</i>	My supervisor is punitive; has no pity or compassion	0.909	53.710	0.732	0.942	0.230	0.123
	My supervisor is in charge and does not tolerate disagreement or questioning, gives orders	0.907	66.950				
	My supervisor acts like a tyrant or despot; imperious	0.877	44.086				
	My supervisor tends to be unwilling or unable to relinquish control of projects or tasks	0.802	28.904				
	My supervisor expects unquestioning obedience of those who report to him/her	0.898	48.720				
	My supervisor is vengeful; seeks revenge when wronged	0.723	20.261				
	During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel nervous?	0.689	17.526	0.628	0.910	0.230	0.128
<i>Psychological distress</i>	During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel hopeless?	0.819	31.130				
	During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel restless or fidgety?	0.864	39.913				
	During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel so depressed that nothing could cheer you up?	0.836	34.145				
	During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel that everything was an effort?	0.813	30.126				
	During the past 30 days, about how often did you feel worthless?	0.718	19.689				
	All in all, I am satisfied with my job	0.834	26.710	0.653	0.848	0.171	0.112
	In general, I like working here	0.878	30.525				
<i>Job satisfaction</i>	All things considered, I am satisfied with my current job	0.701	17.119				
	I often think of leaving the organization	0.628	13.063	0.608	0.820	0.162	0.101
	I intend to look for a new job within the next year	0.817	22.948				
<i>Turnover intention</i>	If I could choose again, I would not work for this organization	0.873	26.314				

Table 2.

Notes: Confirmatory factor analysis fit indices ( $\chi^2 = 294.98$ ,  $df = 123$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.398$ , CFI = 0.939; TLI = 0.924; RMSEA = 0.081; and SRMR = 0.054) Loading, AVEs, CRs, MSV and ASV

were higher than 0.5 and the values of the CR were higher than 0.70 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). For instance, AVE values were as follows: despotic leadership = 0.732, psychological distress = 0.628, job satisfaction = 0.653 and turnover = 0.608. CR values were as follows: despotic leadership = 0.942, psychological distress = 0.910, job satisfaction = 0.848 and turnover = 0.820. Furthermore, MSV and ASV values were lower than AVEs, providing support for the discriminant validity in our study. Finally, we used Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion to check for discriminant validity in which the square root of AVE needs to be above the values of the associations among the variables. The figures presented in Table 3 suggest that the square root of the AVEs was > than the associations among the research constructs. The results provide another support for the discriminant validity in our study.

## Results

### Initial analysis

Table 3 illustrates the values of the Pearson correlations and the square root of the AVE. The reported correlations were as follows: despotic leadership and psychological distress ( $r = 0.480, p < 0.01$ ), despotic leadership and turnover intention ( $r = 0.301, p < 0.01$ ), despotic leadership and job satisfaction ( $r = -0.414, p < 0.01$ ), psychological distress and turnover intention ( $r = 0.402, p < 0.01$ ) and psychological distress and job satisfaction ( $r = -0.352, p < 0.01$ ).

### Hypothesis testing

The fit indices for the structural equation model were as follows: ( $\chi^2 = 393.942, df = 153; \chi^2/df = 2.574, CFI = 0.917; TLI = 0.900; RMSEA = 0.086; \text{ and } SRMR = 0.085$ ). The results reported in Figure 2 suggest that despotic leadership was negatively associated with job satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.285, p < 0.001$ ), which lends support for *H1*. Nevertheless, the direct effect of despotic leadership on turnover intention was insignificant ( $\beta = 0.062, p > 0.05$ ), which does not provide support for *H2*. Despotic leadership showed to exert a positive effect on psychological distress ( $\beta = 0.489, p < 0.001$ ). This lends support to *H3*. The effects of psychological distress on job satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.239, p < 0.001$ ) and turnover intention ( $\beta = 0.456, p < 0.001$ ) were significant, which supports *H4* and *H5*. Regarding the mediation analysis, the results showed that psychological distress mediated the negative impact of despotic leadership on job satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.117, p < 0.01$ ) and the positive impact of despotic leadership on turnover intention ( $\beta = 0.223, p < 0.001$ ). These results provide support for *H6a* and *H6b*. Finally, the experience was positively associated with job satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.135, p < 0.05$ ) and negatively associated with psychological distress ( $\beta = -0.177, p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that the more experience an employee has, the more satisfied this employee will be and the less psychological distress will have. Although the nature of the job as a control variable (part-time vs full-time) did not show significant results in the model, the results of the *t*-test suggest that full-time employees are more satisfied than their part-time counterparts (*t*-test = 3.37, mean = 4.03, SD = 0.92, *p*-value =  $p < 0.01$ ). Furthermore, part-time employees are more likely to leave their jobs than full-time employees (*t*-test = 2.02, mean = 3.40, SD = 0.90,  $p < 0.05$ ).

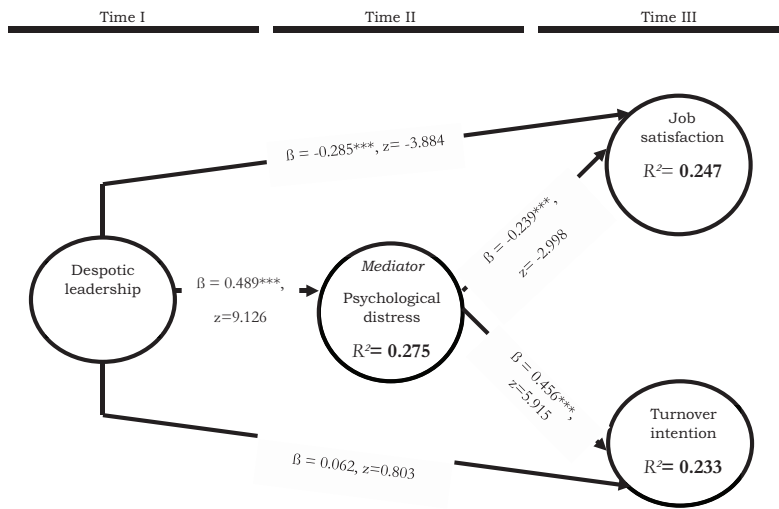
## Discussion

We aimed in this research to investigate the effects of despotic leadership on employees' work outcomes; namely, job satisfaction and turnover intention. In this model, we used psychological distress as a mediating mechanism among the aforementioned relationships. We contended that the adverse effects of despotic leadership can be explained by the COR and the unfolding theory of turnover. Thus, we drew on these two theoretical frameworks to

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Despotic leadership	2.160	1.041	(0.856)								
Psychological distress	2.967	1.002	0.480**	(0.792)							
Job satisfaction	3.862	0.921	-0.414**	-0.352**	(0.808)						
Turnover intention	3.223	1.076	0.301**	0.402**	-0.391**	(0.799)					
Supervisor religiosity	3.868	1.089	0.054	0.064	0.034	0.028	1.000				
Gender	-	0.191	0.101*	0.101*	0.102*	0.013	0.023	1.000			
Age	2.175	0.989	-0.026	-0.109*	0.222**	-0.006	0.008	0.115*	1.000		
Industrial experience	2.137	1.099	-0.186*	-0.214**	0.232**	-0.039	-0.018	0.020	0.588**	1.000	
Nature of the job	-	0.490	-0.321**	-0.051	0.224**	-0.131*	-0.063	0.009	0.065	0.215**	1.000

Notes: \*\* significant as 0.01 level and \* significant at 0.05 level

**Table 3.**  
Descriptive statistics,  
intercorrelations and  
the square root of the  
AVE in the diagonal



**Mediating Effects**

Despotic leadership → Psychological distress → Job satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.117^{**}$ ,  $z = -2.812$ , LLCI: -0.198, ULCI: -0.035)

Despotic leadership → Psychological distress → Turnover ( $\beta = 0.223^{***}$ ,  $z = 4.784$ , LLCI: 0.131, ULCI: 0.314).

Experience → Job satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.135^*$ , SE= 0.068,  $z = 1.990$ , LLCI: 0.002, ULCI: 0.268).

Experience → Psychological distress ( $\beta = -0.177^{**}$ , SE= 0.062,  $z = -2.857$ , LLCI: -0.298, ULCI: -0.056).

**Notes:** Indirect effects assessed via bootstrapping 95% CI, industrial experience and nature of the job are controlled. LLCI: lower-level CI, ULCI: upper-level CI,  $\beta$ : standardized coefficients Structural model fit indices ( $\chi^2 = 393.942$ ,  $df = 153$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.574$ , CFI = 0.917; TLI = 0.900; RMSEA = 0.086; and SRMR = 0.085) \*\*\*Significant at 0.001 level, \*\* significant at 0.01 level and \* significant at 0.05 level

**Figure 2.**  
Direct and indirect effects

propose the research hypotheses in order to explain how despotic leadership leads to negative outcomes, including psychological distress, lower levels of job satisfaction and turnover intentions among employees. According to the results, despotic leadership showed to be negatively associated with job satisfaction. These results imply that despotic leadership has a proximal effect on job satisfaction. When leaders display punitive behaviors, ask for complete obedience and show no tolerance or compassion, employees are more likely to get dissatisfied with their jobs. This is in line with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), in which employees try to protect their resources through mechanisms such as isolation or silence, which can ultimately cause job dissatisfaction. Second, on the relationship between despotic leadership and turnover intention, the direct link was insignificant, which implies that the relationship between these variables is not proximal or straightforward. On the other hand, despotic leadership showed to positively relate to psychological distress. The results are consistent with previous findings, which suggested that leaders' destructive behaviors are positively associated with psychological distress (Nauman *et al.*, 2018).

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This implies that when employees try to cope with the stressors at the workplace, their resources get depleted, this ultimately results in mental fatigue, psychological distress and burnout (Carlson *et al.*, 2012). The results also indicate that psychological distress negatively influences job satisfaction and is positively associated with turnover intention. These results are in line with previous assertions on the effects of psychological distress on emotional exhaustion (Anasori *et al.*, 2020), which would ultimately lead to unfavorable attitudes such as job dissatisfaction, absence from work and work disengagement (Borritz *et al.*, 2006; Hakanen *et al.*, 2006). Finally, the results showed that psychological distress mediated the relationship between despotic leadership and job satisfaction (partial mediation) and the relationship between despotic leadership and turnover intention (full mediation). These findings indicate that, when employees perceive despotic leadership, they are more likely to get distressed due to the depletion of resources. This, in turn, will lead employees to develop negative attitudes as a coping strategy to protect further resource loss.

### Implications for theory

This research contributes to the literature on destructive leadership styles in general and in the hospitality industry in particular. It has been argued that despotic leadership as a destructive leadership style received limited attention in psychology and management research (Naseer *et al.*, 2016) and empirical research pertaining to this leadership style is scarce (De Clercq *et al.*, 2018; Nauman *et al.*, 2020). To the authors' best knowledge, this is the first study that examines the effects of despotic leadership on employees' outcomes in a hospitality setting. Second, this research sheds light on two important job attitudes among hospitality employees. Job satisfaction is a fundamental job attitude in hospitality, as this affects employees' productivity and customer service. More specifically, it can be said that satisfied employees are less likely to be absent and distressed and provide quality services. On the other hand, we responded to the calls made by Park and Min (2020), who argued that hospitality research lacks a holistic understanding of what factors influence turnover intention in hospitality research. This is because turnover is a problematic issue in the hospitality industry due to the high costs associated with replacement, reduced quality and new hiring costs (Tews and Stafford, 2020). Third, we try to improve our understanding of how leaders can make employees distressed by unpacking the link between despotic leadership and psychological distress. In hospitality research, the empirical literature is mostly focused on positive styles of leadership, such as empowering leadership, servant leadership, ethical leadership and transformational leadership, whereas the question of whether supervisors can make their employees distressed has received limited attention. Furthermore, it has been argued that studying stress in hospitality organizations is of utmost importance because stress can reduce the overall productivity and increase the cost for hospitality organizations (O'Neill and Davis, 2011).

### Implications for practice

This study offers important implications for hospitality organizations and especially restaurants managers. A significant implication is that despotic leaders' behaviors can reduce employees' job satisfaction and increase their turnover intention. When employees experience job dissatisfaction and have a higher tendency to quit their jobs, the overall performance and productivity of the organization will be affected. Consequently, hospitality organizations that fail to spot despotic inclinations of their leaders and their underlying drive for power risk having psychologically drained employees, which would untimely cause dissatisfaction and leave no room for employees but to quit. Based on that, we offer several practical implications. First, although it is preferable for restaurants to avoid hiring leaders with despotic tendencies, serious actions can be also done to prevent psychological distress among

employees by providing accessibility to the management, in which they can give anonymous comments on the despotic leader. Given that some employees are reluctant or show fear in providing feedback, the management needs to encourage their employees to raise their voices and file confidential complaints against despotic tendencies such as aggression, bullying and intimidation. Once this feedbacks are received, restaurants managers need to take serious actions and investigate these grievances thoroughly. As despotic leaders can manipulate and harm employees who provide feedback, the confidentiality of reporting must be guaranteed.

Second, and in the same vein of inquiry, restaurants managers are called upon activating, nurturing and enforcing a code of conduct where it clearly highlights what behaviors are accepted and which are not to prohibit despotic tendencies among leaders. Although difficult, restaurants managers need to identify the sources of despotic behaviors which may include ineffective hiring and staffing policies. They can also develop specific protocols to advise and counsel despotic leaders and create proper disciplinary measures (e.g. cut in salaries, providing less rewards, etc.), especially if these leaders are resistant to change.

Third, restaurants may need to exert efforts to develop a supportive and positive work climate through implementing their practices and policies which demotivate and disincentivize despotic behaviors that contribute to the creation of a hostile work environment. Fourth, there is a strong need to increase leaders' awareness that their despotic behaviors negatively influence employees' well-being, satisfaction and intention to remain. This awareness can be built through an organizational effort dedicated to educating and training leaders on norms of appropriate leadership behaviors and the negative consequences of despotic tendencies. Fifth, given the destructive effect of despotic leaders' behaviors on psychological well-being, restaurants may consider providing their employees with assistance programs aimed at resolving work-related stress. Also, it could be useful to provide counseling services to the victims of despotic leadership behaviors to minimize manifestations of psychological distress such as anxiety and depression. Finally, restaurants need to provide employees with attractive long-term employment benefits to increase the cost of leaving. These may include medical care support, payment on retirement and pension. In cultures where it is shaped by collectivism, employees are likely to stay in their organizations when they have long-term employment benefits (Saleem *et al.*, 2018).

### **Social implications**

The study's findings are vital to the society as they provide recommendations to have less toxic work environment. Minimizing despotic leadership behaviors at the workplace can build a happier and healthier workforce which is fundamental for society and the economy alike. This is because happier employees are more likely to exhibit higher productivity (Oswald *et al.*, 2015), which would, in turn, influence the economic expansion of the organization. Under such conditions, economic growth may be an outcome at the collective level. In addition, happier employees tend to have a higher commitment and more energy to fulfill their job duties. With this realization, customer satisfaction will increase, which will eventually contribute to better business performance.

### **Limitations and future research**

This study has some limitations which need to be addressed. First, our study included only one type of negative leadership and its impact on employees' attitudes. Future research may use our findings as a basis considering testing the impact of different negative leadership styles, such as abusive supervision, narcissistic leadership, authoritarian and despotic leadership on employees' work outcomes. This will be useful in identifying the relative

effects of these negative leadership styles. Second, our model included only employees' attitudes, namely, job satisfaction and turnover intention. Future research in hospitality may consider testing the impact of despotic leadership on employees' behaviors such as voice, creativity and knowledge sharing behavior. Third, our data comes from employees working in restaurants. Therefore, future research can validate the model in different hospitality sectors, such as hotels, the airline industry and tourism agencies. Fourth, future research may benefit from conducting comparisons across countries (developed vs developing) in the hospitality setting to address the effect of the national culture and its interaction with the research variables. Finally, in this research, the proposed links were examined at the individual level because our analysis did not count for multi-level analysis (as interclass-correlation results did not support multi-level analysis). Future research may consider multi-level modeling to count for the structure of nested data.

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