

Hassanein, Fida Ragheb; Mohammadi, Samaneh; Zargar, Pouya

## Article

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## Article

# Toxic Leadership and Job Satisfaction in the Middle Eastern Education Sector: The Influence of Organizational Culture and Trust

Fida Ragheb Hassanein <sup>1</sup>, Samaneh Mohammadi <sup>2</sup> and Pouya Zargar <sup>3,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Business, Lebanese International University, Beirut 146404, Lebanon; fida.hassanein@liu.edu.lb<sup>2</sup> Department of Business Administration, Cyprus International University, Nicosia 99258, Northern Cyprus, Turkey; smohammadi@ciu.edu.tr<sup>3</sup> Department of Business Administration, ARUCAD Research Centre, Arkin University of Creative Arts and Design, Mersin 10, Northern Cyprus, Turkey

\* Correspondence: p.zargar@hotmail.com

**Abstract:** Toxic leadership has profound implications for employees' psychological wellbeing, particularly in academia, as a supportive workplace is crucial for intellectual prosperity and growth. In various parts of the Middle East, toxic leadership has been a major element in suppressing academic freedom, low levels of creativity, and innovation backed with favoritism, nepotism, and lack of support. This study examines the detrimental effects of toxic leaders on academic staff's job satisfaction among academic staff in Middle Eastern universities. Grounded in the social learning theory, leader-member exchange theory, and conservation of resources theory, this research examines the mediating effect of organizational culture and trust in leaders. A quantitative approach using partial least squares—structural equation modeling with Smart-PLS software Version 3—was deployed on survey data from 236 faculty members and academic administrators across 11 universities in the region. The results show that toxic leadership significantly reduces job satisfaction, which is better explained by key mediating elements of organizational culture and trust in leaders. The findings highlight the need for fostering a culture of trust, leadership development, and transparent strategies to enhance the academic workplace for the staff and improve the dynamic and performance of the educational environment in the region. This study provides practical recommendations for mitigating toxic leadership in the education sector of the Middle East through empirically validating its detrimental effects on the psychological wellbeing of academic staff, which is a major element that barriers significant academic achievements.



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**Keywords:** leadership; organizational culture; trust in leader; job satisfaction; psychological wellbeing; middle east

## 1. Introduction

The importance of leadership for organizational success and achievements is established in the literature in different sectors (e.g., F. Alanezi, 2021; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020; Zargar et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021; Jones, 2006). In the context of the current research, we focus on toxic leadership due to its negative and unique characteristics that can diminish a number of elements in the organization. This is due to the hindering effects these leaders have on their employees by creating a toxic environment that reduces trust (Farmanesh & Zargar, 2021), job satisfaction (Matos et al., 2018; Uysal, 2019; Fahie, 2019),

engagement (Rasool et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2020), motivation (Milosevic et al., 2020), and wellbeing (Emirie & Mengistu Gebremeskel, 2024; Yaghi & Yaghi, 2021). As can be observed in the extant literature, the issue of toxic leadership is noted in a variety of settings, which states its complex nature.

Depleting the shared agenda of toxic leadership is a significant obstacle to overcome in some Middle Eastern countries. However, there are a few cross-cutting elements that cut across borders and overlap in most of these nations. A strategy such as the consolidation of power is a common unethical leadership practice that is often used by toxic leaders in the Middle East (Padilla et al., 2007). Leaders prioritize the maintenance of power as a top agenda and maintain their hold on it by using a variety of tactics and strategies to use the power to their advantage to maintain their grip on the institutions they run (Alayoubi et al., 2020).

Throughout the nations of the Middle East, certain toxic leaders intentionally sow racial and ethnic discord in order to further their own political agendas and advance their own personal interests (Byman, 2002). Toxic leaders in the Middle East often violate human rights, including civil, political, and social rights (Shaw, 2012). It is possible for leaders to engage in practices such as the restriction of people's rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and religion, as well as arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial murders. Both corrupt business practices and poor management of the economy stymie the growth of the economy, which in turn impacts and exacerbates socioeconomic disparities (Bajada & Shashnov, 2019). Toxic leaders have made it the order of the day to accumulate shared resources intentionally and deliberately for the purpose of enriching themselves while denying the common masses of advantages to the country (Mackey et al., 2021). As a result, these leaders have neglected the welfare of their population and impeded equitable development.

As a result of the significant impact that toxic leadership concerns have on democratic governance and stability, as well as human rights and the dynamics of the area, it is very essential that these issues be addressed and that efforts be made to foster good and ethical leadership in the region (Thoroughgood et al., 2018).

The current research aims to contribute to the understanding of toxic leadership and its effects in an academic setting in the Middle East, as it has been noted in the existing literature that toxic leadership persists in the region, particularly in the academic sector. Due to the importance of organizational culture, this factor is also examined based on the diversity of participants in this research. This enables the researchers to interpret data regarding any differences among numerous nationalities within the scope of toxic leaders and their impact on organizational culture and trust. Furthermore, this research aims to contribute to the literature by providing empirical evidence from the Middle East, which is relatively less examined in this context.

In the scope of this research, toxic leadership is regarded specifically in the education sector, stating that the role of these leaders is essential in forming the educational atmosphere through organizational culture. Toxic leadership can be described as an approach in which the motives, behaviors, and style of the leader are negative, disruptive, and destructive (Koo et al., 2022; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). These can cause several negative psychological outcomes originating from the workplace and its environment, such as stress, anxiety, turnover, decreased performance, and job satisfaction, among others (Goldman, 2006; Mahlangu, 2014). As a crucial element of leadership effectiveness, trust is notably violated by toxic leaders (Al Zaabi et al., 2018). Toxic leaders can yield undesirable outcomes for organizations, such as potential for negative behaviors including low commitment and engagement, burnout, and turnover, which can have dire impacts on the overall wellbeing of employees. Specifically, in the current research, the influence of toxic leaders on the atmosphere of trust is examined as a mediating effect. A lack of or low levels of trust

as major psychological elements have vivid impacts on employees' work-related behaviors. The current research follows a string of research that focuses on leadership and trust after the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., [Farmanesh & Zargar, 2021](#); [Saleem et al., 2021](#); [Khan, 2021](#)).

In this respect, this study uses a set of theories and criteria to address the effect of toxic leaders on job satisfaction alongside the influence of trust and organizational culture. The endeavor aims to provide a better understanding of the psychological wellbeing of employees (i.e., academic) who have been selected based on the aforementioned criteria. These are further explained in the design section of the research. These are in accord with the noted gaps in the literature pertaining to toxic leadership, empirical evidence, the Middle Eastern context, and sample specification of academic employees (i.e., university teachers and administrators). Toxic leaders affect the future of societies due to the educational setting and student relationships that are under their influence. This study aims to highlight the hindering effect of these leaders in an academic setting that can have long-term effects on societies.

## 2. Hypotheses and Theories

### 2.1. Toxic Leadership and Job Satisfaction

The social exchange theory best explains the relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction, as previously used by [Brouwers and Paltu \(2020\)](#). In the context of the social exchange theory, people take part in a social exchange process between an organization and its leadership structure. This suggests that workers typically evaluate their experiences at work based on what they offer in exchange for the cost–benefit analysis that is performed ([Brouwers & Paltu, 2020](#)). Toxic leaders produce unfavorable interactions in the workplace, and this, in turn, inflicts emotional suffering and produces a hostile work environment. As a result of unethical behaviors of the leaders, it creates the psychological connection between leaders and employees is interrupted, which, in turn, results in job dissatisfaction ([Orunbon et al., 2022](#)).

Toxic leadership breaches the reciprocal expectations of respect, fairness, and support, which ultimately leads to a breakdown of trust and a decrease in work satisfaction for those affected. It is possible for workers to have emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation, and disengagement, which have a negative impact on their overall job satisfaction ([A. Alanezi, 2024](#)).

The social exchange theory fits in the scope of current research as it pertains to the concept of toxic leaders and their overall impact on the wellbeing of individuals in the workplace. The literature shows that toxic leadership has explicit negative effects on the job satisfaction (physical and psychological components) of their subordinates through stress and anxiety, inducing destructive and abusive behavior that results in demotivation, low engagement, burnout, and turnover ([Behery et al., 2018](#)). Within the context of the education industry, the role of these leaders is more crucial due to their second-level impact on society and younger generations.

In the premise of social exchange theory, this research argues that job satisfaction of employees in the academic setting is directly influenced by toxic leaders in a manner that hinders their overall wellbeing. This research is focused on the direct outcome of hindered wellbeing (i.e., job satisfaction) among the staff, which can in turn impact their interactions with students and thus have an influence on the educational setting and overall experience of university students. In this scope, it is also important to describe the notion of job satisfaction in this research. As an influential element, job satisfaction entails both physical and psychological aspects of a job, such as workplace environment, incentives, income, and group and supervisor relationships ([Clark et al., 1996](#); [Schmidt, 2008](#); [Zargar et al., 2019](#)). Toxic leaders tend to have controlled behavior, which reduces autonomy and

innovation and causes both mental and physical problems for their followers due to stress, toxic organizational culture, and performance (Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020; Jones, 2006; Firing et al., 2022).

Akca (2017) observed that toxic leadership has some negative consequences on job satisfaction and the work environment; however, it should not be confused with transactional leaders or difficult people. On the one hand, a decisive, demanding, and sometimes verbally abusive leader may not necessarily be “toxic” to people (Tavanti, 2011). On the other hand, even charming and cheerful leaders may be toxic. It is not necessarily the attitudes and style of communication that make a leader toxic, it is the systemic discouraging effects that often indicate toxic dynamics (Erickson et al., 2015). Toxic leaders might be highly competent and effective in their jobs, but they contribute to an unhealthy climate among their peers and subordinates with consequences far beyond the morale of a few victims. Toxic leaders are generally highly competent and effective in the short-sighted sense, but in the long run, they carry high human and financial costs. They like to succeed by tearing others down.

Toxic leadership generally has a negative impact on employees’ performance in the workplace. However, it is important not to only focus on the negative effects of toxic leadership. In rare instances, there are some positive effects of toxic leadership in the workplace (Winn & Dykes, 2019). According to Winn and Dykes (2019), the limited positive effects of toxic leadership are short-term or superficial in nature. In some contexts, toxic leadership may increase motivation and resilience. Toxic leadership can make some employees become more determined and motivated to showcase their worth or overcome adversity in response to a toxic leader, especially in a context where the ultimate choice is working and dealing with the toxic leaders (Zhang et al., 2015).

Toxic leaders can intentionally create a challenging environment that can eventually lead employees to develop a coping mechanism and foster a sense of resilience and determination in individuals who are driven to succeed despite the obstacles they face (Hitchcock, 2015). The consistent attitude and behavior of toxic leaders can be a driving force that may lead individuals to reflect on their own values, strengths, and weaknesses. This self-reflection can promote personal growth, self-awareness, and the development of coping strategies to navigate difficult situations (Laguda, 2021).

Toxic leadership can also strengthen unity and support among employees (Erdal & Budak, 2021). Especially when the employees are faced with the ultimate choice of dealing with a toxic leader, employees may band together and provide mutual support. They may tend to share the experience of dealing with a toxic leader, which can foster a sense of camaraderie and solidarity among colleagues, leading to stronger bonds and increased collaboration (Lipman-Blumen, 2006). On the other hand, dealing with toxic leaders may result in employees developing conflict resolution skills amongst themselves. In such situations, employees may develop and refine their conflict resolution skills to manage interpersonal conflicts and find constructive solutions.

In accordance with what was mentioned, the following hypothesis has emerged:

**Hypothesis 1.** *There is a significantly negative effect on job satisfaction among academic staff through toxic leadership.*

## 2.2. Trust in Leader

Trust is a complex psychological factor that entails several aspects, such as intention, expectation, and accepting weaknesses, which are explained through cognitive, affective, and behavioral forms of trust (Farmanesh & Zargar, 2021). In this respect, the level of trustworthiness of an individual is cognitive; the emotional component linked to the formation of trust is affective, and reliance and actual trust are regarded as behavioral trust.



In the current context, these are reflected in the attitude and approach of the leader in an organizational setting whose culture is also affected through the destructive and abusive traits of toxic leaders (Behery et al., 2018). Due to the negative behaviors of toxic leaders and their traits (e.g., authoritarian, narcissistic), the workplace environment deteriorates into an unethical and devaluing setting that impacts the three dimensions of trust with regard to other people (cognitive), emotional states in the workplace (affective), and lack of behavioral trust towards the leader and peers (Gillespie & Mann, 2004; Behery et al., 2018; Rousseau et al., 1998). This implies that the role of toxic leaders in the workplace cannot be neglected due to their influence on the overall work setting, in which academic staff are to perform their tasks. It is argued in this study that toxic leaders are diminishing to the wellbeing of their staff during and after a crisis (Emirie & Mengistu Gebremeskel, 2024; Witzel, 2022).

The effect of toxic leaders on the workplace is explicit as they disregard ethical means of conduct. This is highly influential in terms of establishing an environment of trust for the staff, particularly towards their leaders (Firing et al., 2022; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021). The current research specifically examines the role of trust (more accurately, its absence) in the relationship between toxic leaders and job satisfaction of academic staff. It is also important to note that the element of trust is a highly important factor in the current context, as it is deeply rooted in the organizational culture that is led by a toxic leader.

Within the confines of leader–member exchange (LMX) theory, the linkage and interaction between leader and each follower is described as an ongoing process, which has outcomes linked to interpersonal trust. The implication of LMX and its coverage of trust as a theoretical framework within psychology is observed in the extant literature (e.g., Liden et al., 1997; Brower et al., 2000; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2008; Zhou et al., 2021; Bellou & Dimou, 2022; Meng et al., 2017). Therefore, it is appropriate that LMX is regarded in the current context as toxic leaders negatively impact trust as their interactions are unethical, biased, and authoritarian. Considering the vivid influence of toxic leaders on trust and its formation in an organizational setting, where social interactions occur routinely, the following hypothesis is shaped:

**Hypothesis 2.** *Trust in the leader has a mediating effect on the toxic leader–job satisfaction relationship.*

### 2.3. Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is a broad term that covers operations, people, and processes of work. In the educational setting, organizational culture is highly important for strategies and managing change or crises (Tierney, 1988; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). Accordingly, the environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership are noted as dimensions of organizational culture. Notably, environment pertains to and includes both the organization and the society that it is located in; for the mission, it is important to be clear in its message as a guideline; interactions among staff (groups or teams) are regarded as socialization (e.g., collaborative); information pertains to its flow and its communication across the organization; strategies of the firm refer to ones that can be inclusive, exclusive, or other forms regarding their employee relationships; and leadership is the manner with which the company steers itself and highlights its goals and visions that is shown in its cultural work setting. These are dimensions that shape the organizational culture specifically in a university setting. When toxic leaders are present, the work environment becomes hostile and, in the long term, can have significantly undesirable results for the organization (Cleary et al., 2013; Khasawneh et al., 2024).

It has been observed in the literature of toxic leadership that it is more possible to rise in collectivist, ambiguity-avoidant, and power-distant societies (Powers et al., 2016; Twale & De Luca, 2008). Organizations where toxic leaders can have more impact are those that

give them more control over the workplace (e.g., institutions, highly competitive markets, and politicized economies) (Khasawneh et al., 2024; Frazier, 2011; Thomas, 2010; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). This research argues that in the Middle East, the cultural settings are often traditional and, thus, are suitable for strong experiences for leadership positions, which, if toxic, can have dire effects on the organization specifically in the education setting (i.e., universities) (Ahmed et al., 2024; Farley & Sprigg, 2014). Under toxic leadership organizational cultures, the employees are mistreated, and their values are disregarded as the emphasis is on organizational and/or personal achievements and not the wellbeing of individuals.

Similarly, conservation of resource (COR) theory suggests that individuals experience stress when they do not have adequate physical or psychological resources to cope with the stressor (Hobfoll, 2011; Koo et al., 2022; Lipman-Blumen, 2006). In the context of current research, toxic leaders are described as self-promoting, abusive, unpredictable, narcissistic, and authoritarian/controlling (Schmidt, 2008). Combining both COR and social learning theories, subordinates of toxic leaders must endure “role models” who increase stress through their conduct. Furthermore, employees of toxic leaders are deprived of adequate autonomy, resources, and other physical and psychological components that are needed for completing tasks. In the education sector, it is important to note that employees had to change to an online setting upon the occurrence of the global pandemic, and, thus, various challenges were posed to the mental and physical health of academic staff. It is reported in the literature that loneliness, work–life balance, autonomy, stress and anxiety, and other negative factors have been observed among academic staff (e.g., Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020; Farmanesh & Zargar, 2021; EL Telyani et al., 2022; Telyani et al., 2021; Zakhem et al., 2022).

Due to the stressful workplace environment that is established by toxic leaders, employees are prone to emotional instability, which can have dire impacts on their satisfaction, trust, creative and innovative behavior, and overall performance (Whicker, 1996). Within the premises of COR theory, toxic leaders tend to assign unjust tasks that staff are often incapable of performing. This in turn leads to a workplace environment that is unethical, unhealthy, and with negative organizational culture values (Zhao et al., 2013; Winn & Dykes, 2019; Rasool et al., 2020). Ethics are diminished in the presence of toxic leaders. This can negatively influence workflow and interactions (social) in the workplace, which, during uncertain times of a global pandemic, can be more problematic for the employees involved (i.e., academic staff) (Farmanesh & Zargar, 2021; Burton & Hoobler, 2011). Both work engagement and commitment are negatively influenced under the leadership of a toxic character, as the cultivation of negative aspects in the organizational culture leads to decreased trust, low morale, and diminished psychological resources. In these scenarios, both the toxic leader and the toxic organizational culture coincide with one another and create a climate that can impact the wellbeing of individuals (Ahmed et al., 2024; Saleem et al., 2021).

Social learning theory is also related to both social cognitive and self-determination theories (Bandura, 1989). In this regard, in a social setting (i.e., workplace), individuals interact with and learn from each other alongside reciprocating behaviors and actions. Emotional and cognitive components are involved in the interactions, and thus, group and/or supervisor relationships are influential on all those involved (Oden et al., 2019; Telyani et al., 2021). In the current context, the noted theories and findings in the literature show that organizational culture and toxic leadership are linked, which further increases their effects on individuals in a workplace that requires high levels of resources (demanding job of teachers) (Baskan, 2020; Green, 2014; Aubrey, 2012; Singh et al., 2018). In light of

what was mentioned above and the aims of the current research, the following hypothesis is designed:

**Hypothesis 3.** *Organizational culture has a mediating effect on the job satisfaction–toxic leadership linkage among academic staff.*

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Methodology and Criteria

The current study takes a quantitative approach, in which the purposive sampling method was used to ensure that the participants have experienced and/or are experiencing toxic leadership (direct or indirect among managers). We established contact with deans and/or managers in each university and conducted discussions with them regarding the aspects and context of toxic leadership. Upon ensuring that the characteristics of toxic leadership are witnessed and persist in these institutions, we selected them for data collection. Researchers used an extensive network of contacts to discuss the specifics of the research and the characteristics of toxic leaders with each participant. Using G\*power version 3.1, and recommendations of [Hair et al. \(2017\)](#) ( $\alpha = 0.05$ , effect size: 0.15, statistical power: 90%), the sample size was calculated between 182 and 230. Participation was completely voluntary, and all participants were given written consent forms and were provided with confidentiality and anonymity. Withdrawal of responses was also made possible at any given stage upon participants' request. The purposive sampling enabled the researchers to establish the presence of toxic leaders in 11 universities across the Middle East. These were from Turkey, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, the Emirates, and Saudi Arabia due to similarity in the context of toxic leadership ([A. Alanezi, 2024](#); [Göçen, 2021](#); [Jabbouri, 2023](#); [Koo et al., 2022](#)). The positions of these leaders ranged from mid-level manager to dean, rectorate, and high managerial levels. Upon this establishment, the snowballing method was used to increase the number of respondents based on their availability and willingness to participate. The inclusion criteria and combined sampling techniques further increased the response rate to 100%, as 236 distributed surveys were returned (via email or file transfer) (excluding a pilot test with 28 university teachers from 2 universities that were eliminated from the final analysis).

According to the review of the literature, toxic leadership harms workers and the company. Toxic leadership decreases employees' wellbeing, subordinates' organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational performance, loyalty, trust, followers' active engagement, employees' mental and physical health, and productivity, according to [Tepper and Duffy \(2002\)](#). Toxic leadership is rising and can hurt the organization and its employees. Poisonous leadership has emerged to define its qualities and behaviors ([Milosevic et al., 2020](#)). There is little research on toxic or destructive leadership, but there is an increase in studies on harmful behaviors, which researchers categorize as abusive, tyrannical, destructive, bullying, unethical, or toxic ([Li et al., 2023](#)).

Most educational administration studies have disregarded the negative aspect of leadership. This ignorance exposed educational dark leadership research. Toxic school leaders are like other leaders ([A. Alanezi, 2024](#)). Toxic leadership cuts across cultural and contextual factors that may influence Middle Eastern leadership practices since they share similar cultural norms ([Hattab et al., 2022](#)). Most educational administration studies have disregarded the negative aspect of leadership. This ignorance exposed educational dark leadership research. Toxic school leaders are like other leaders ([Babatunde & Nurudeen, 2020](#)). Questionnaire scales from the previous literature identified toxic leaders in 11 Middle Eastern universities. Toxic leadership cuts across cultural and contextual factors that may



influence Middle Eastern leadership practices since they share similar cultural norms (Dorfman, 1996).

Deductive research questions or hypotheses are based on a theoretical framework or body of knowledge (Casula et al., 2021). These hypotheses were based on theories, scientific findings, or logical inferences (Powell, 2001). Next, the study approach and data-gathering methods were structured to prove or disprove the hypothesis (McCutcheon & Meredith, 1993). A relevant theory or body of knowledge to underpin the investigation is deployed (Darko et al., 2020). The theory aids hypotheses and research questions. Based on theory, the researcher creates precise hypotheses. Research design and data collection methods gather empirical data to test hypotheses. The researcher selects appropriate tools, identifies variables, and accumulates relevant data (Dawadi et al., 2021). Data are analyzed using statistical or analytical methods to determine variable relationships. Analysis determines how much data supports or contradicts assumptions (Schmiedel et al., 2020). Analysis informs the researcher's assumptions and evidence. Results are then given inside the theory. The deductive method lets you refine or change hypotheses based on data (Harley & Cornelissen, 2022). Quantitative research uses the deductive method to test hypotheses using statistical analysis (Adler, 2022). Qualitative research uses detailed research questions to guide data collection and analysis.

### 3.2. Respondents' Profile

The age of participants had an average of 34.8 years ( $SD = 5.7$ ), and the majority were male, at 67%. The overall average for work experience was found to be 6.1 years ( $SD = 6.3$ ). It was also found that the majority of the participants (68%) were married. To comply with ethical means of conduct and ensure data anonymity and confidentiality while decreasing method bias, no personal or sensitive (e.g., income, and religion) data were obtained from participants.

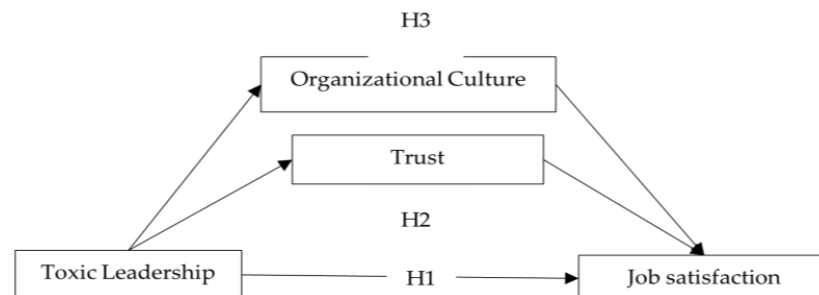
### 3.3. Measurements

The toxic leadership scale was derived based on the toxic leadership scale (Kilic & Günsel, 2019), considering each characteristic (self-promoting, abusive, unpredictable, narcissistic, and authoritarian/controlling). The questions pertaining to job satisfaction were taken from a job satisfaction survey (Spector, 1985). An organizational culture survey (Tierney, 1988) was used to measure this factor concerning its dimensions (environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership). Notably, as toxic leadership is examined in current research and based on the inclusion criteria, the presence of such leaders is established among participants, and the leadership dimension of organizational culture is measured through this factor. Lastly, to measure trust in leaders from educational and academic staff in various universities, the organizational trust inventory (Nyhan & Marlowe, 1997) was used.

**Data Collection**—The respondents' consent was requested so as not to put them in a precarious position when it came to participation (this was approved by the Near East University with the code EKK22-23/015/010). The questionnaire was only distributed to individuals who actively agreed to participate. Lecturers and administrative staff who consented to participate were included in the selection criteria. The constructs used were toxic leaders (15 items), which have five dimensions (self-promotion (3), abusive (3), unpredictable (3), narcissistic (3), and controlling (3); organizational culture (15 items), which have five dimensions (environment (3), mission (3), socialization (3), information (3), and strategy (3); trust (4), and job satisfaction (4)). Due to the reliability and validity of the prior work, these constructs were adopted. The reliability of the accepted scales demonstrates that the concepts of toxic leadership, job satisfaction, and trust are all reliable.

### 3.4. Research Model

Based on the hypotheses, aims, and objectives of the research, a model is designed that is tested through a set of criteria for sampling and analytical approaches. While the model is illustrated in Figure 1 below, procedures and techniques deployed for the study are explained in the following sections:



**Figure 1.** Research model.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

The model illustrated in Figure 1 is analyzed through PLS-SEM due to the criteria that contain latent variables, disregard normal distribution, and entail a relatively small sample size (Hair et al., 2017). Based on the measurement model test shown in Table 1, loading values remain between 0.7 and 0.9, which is similar to Rho A, alpha, and composite reliability values that are statistically satisfactory (Jöreskog, 1971; Diamantopoulos et al., 2012; Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015; Hair et al., 2019; Zakhem et al., 2022; Sousan et al., 2022). The heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) results are also within the acceptable range (<0.85) and average variance extracted (AVE) shows values that surpass 0.5, stating the satisfactory level of convergent validity of the data at hand with regard to its items (Henseler et al., 2017; Hair et al., 2017). These findings state that the current model can be regarded as ‘fit’ based on the parameters that are included. Notably, the current model is designed to address the aforementioned aims and objectives of this study and to yield interpretative findings that can be beneficial for both scholars and practitioners. The results of HTMT are shown in Table 2 of the study.

**Table 1.** Measurement model.

Factors	Dimensions	Indicators	Outer Loadings	Alpha	Rho A	CR	AVE
Toxic Leadership	Self-promoting	SP1	0.724	0.809	0.831	0.824	0.635
		SP2	0.816				
		SP3	0.902				
	Abusive	AB1	0.826	0.749	0.811	0.753	0.704
		AB2	0.808				
		AB3	0.813				
	Unpredictable	UNP1	0.851	0.707	0.736	0.737	0.708
		UNP2	0.728				
		UNP3	0.811				

Table 1. Cont.

Factors	Dimensions	Indicators	Outer Loadings	Alpha	Rho A	CR	AVE
Toxic Leadership	Narcissistic	NRC1	0.789	0.788	0.771	0.813	0.767
		NRC2	0.746				
		NRC3	0.795				
	Controlling	CNT1	0.803	0.821	0.765	0.794	0.745
		CNT2	0.819				
		CNT3	0.744				
Job Satisfaction	—	JS1	0.843	0.873	0.842	0.866	0.732
		JS2	0.827				
		JS3	0.874				
		JS4	0.746				
Trust in the Leader	—	TR1	0.886	0.890	0.938	0.856	0.575
		TR2	0.808				
		TR3	0.803				
		TR4	0.723				
Organizational Culture	Environment	ENV1	0.850	0.806	0.911	0.845	0.582
		ENV2	0.841				
		ENV3	0.823				
	Mission	MS1	0.823	0.802	0.830	0.841	0.721
		MS2	0.845				
		MS3	0.757				
	Socialization	SC1	0.887	0.771	0.757	0.720	0.678
		SC2	0.890				
		SC3	0.703				
	Information	INF1	0.765	0.783	0.766	0.813	0.731
		INF2	0.744				
		INF3	0.823				
	Strategy	STR1	0.794	0.794	0.740	0.822	0.714
		STR2	0.772				
		STR3	0.809				

Based on the results that can be observed in Tables 1–3, it can be interpreted that the current model is approved in terms of its validation. Accordingly, it is important to report various indices that fall into the normal fit index (NFI = 0.923) and have standardized root mean square residuals.

(SRMR = 0.021), VIF < 3 (no multicollinearity), and R-square and Q-square state both predictive power and relevance, respectively (Henseler et al., 2009; Hair et al., 2019). The results that are presented in Tables 3 and 4 pertain to what was noted while providing statistical support for the hypotheses of this research.

**Table 2.** Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT).

	SP	AB	UNP	NRC	JS	TR	ENV	MS	SC	INF
SP										
AB	0.708									
UNP	0.488	0.534								
NRC	0.706	0.635	0.734							
JS	0.631	0.713	0.665	0.722						
TR	0.701	0.485	0.673	0.722	0.801					
ENV	0.711	0.702	0.701	0.724	0.724	0.746				
MS	0.466	0.564	0.560	0.622	0.701	0.7012	0.722			
SC	0.512	0.544	0.598	0.578	0.598	0.588	0.611	0.628		
INF	0.537	0.613	0.633	0.649	0.612	0.671	0.622	0.637	0.677	
STR	0.628	0.698	0.648	0.670	0.703	0.720	0.733	0.711	0.702	0.719

**Table 3.** Assessment of reflective-formative constructs.

Construct	Items	Convergent Validity	Weights	VIF	t-Statistics
TL	Self-promoting	0.722	0.373	1.860	4.105
	Abusive		0.371	1.761	4.041
	Unpredictable		0.518	2.232	5.052
	Narcissistic		0.388	1.798	4.127
	Controlling		0.314	1.716	4.198
OC	Environment	0.717	0.413	1.924	5.337
	Mission		0.404	2.012	5.459
	Socialization		0.387	1.903	5.349
	Information		0.408	1.874	5.364
	Strategy		0.411	2.019	5.297

**Table 4.** Hypothesis testing.

Effects	Relations	$\beta$	t-Statistics	$\mathcal{F}^2$	Decision
Direct					
H1	TX $\rightarrow$ JS	−0.312	−5.229 ***	0.102	Supported
Mediation					
H2	TX $\rightarrow$ TR $\rightarrow$ JS	−0.343	−2.348 *	0.108	Supported
H3	TX $\rightarrow$ OC $\rightarrow$ JS	−0.361	−3.689 *	0.112	Supported
Control Variables					
	Gender $\rightarrow$ JS	0.132	2.514 *		
	Age $\rightarrow$ JS	0.119	2.132 *		

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; R<sup>2</sup>TR = 0.37/Q<sup>2</sup>TR = 0.17; R<sup>2</sup>OC = 0.51/Q<sup>2</sup>OC = 0.29; R<sup>2</sup>JS = 0.60/Q<sup>2</sup>JS = 0.34; SRMR: 0.021; NFI: 0.923.

Hypotheses of the research are tested through PLS-SEM, and the results are shown in Table 4. In this regard, the results show that the first hypothesis of the research is supported, which states the direct and negative effect of toxic leadership on job satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.312$ ). Similarly, both mediators that have been included in the model have proven to have significant effects on the relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction.

In this sense, trust has been found to have a negative effect on job satisfaction in the presence of toxic leaders, which was expected, as such leaders tend to diminish the environment that is necessary for trust-building ( $\beta = -0.343$ ). Organizational culture has also been found to have a negative effect on the relationship, which further shows that through toxic leaders, organizational culture becomes a negative determinant of employees' job satisfaction and overall psychological wellbeing ( $\beta = -0.361$ ). Notably, organizational culture has been found to be more influential compared to trust. This can be linked to other aspects that are inherent in organizational culture and can be linked to the physical workplace and/or interactions that occur during work (i.e., supervisors, peers, and/or students). These findings support both the second and third hypotheses of the current research in terms of the negative influence of toxic leaders in reducing trust, poisoning organizational culture, and inevitably decreasing job satisfaction of their employees in the education sector. The results that are presented in Table 4 suggest that the role of toxic leaders in negatively affecting the educational workplace cannot be neglected due to its importance in both organizational settings (i.e., organizational culture and trust) and employee outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction).

As can be observed from the findings, toxic leadership significantly reduces job satisfaction among the academic staff of Middle Eastern universities, supporting the argument that destructive leaders foster a hostile workplace, where educational growth is deteriorated. According to the literature, this leads to emotional exhaustion, diminished trust, and lower commitment towards the organization (Harvey et al., 2021), which, in turn, can diminish the performance of the staff. In this context, this can have dire consequences for students and their educational achievements. The mediating mechanisms of both organizational culture and trust in leadership are also highlighted in the results. A workplace culture that is toxic reinforces the negative influence of leaders and exacerbates the impact on the satisfaction level of employees. Additionally, it decreases the trust in leaders, which weakens the relationship between leaders and members, leading to broken engagement and motivation among the staff (Schilling et al., 2022). These findings are in line with the theoretical framework of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), where toxic leaders' behavior worsens the workplace culture and environment as staff respond to the observed actions of their leaders. Similarly, leader-member exchange theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) suggests that the poor quality of the relationships between leaders and members reduces the wellbeing in the workplace as it reduces trust. Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) also reinforces the notion that staff members exposed to toxic leader behaviors experience depletion of their mental resources, which directly contributes to their burnout and dissatisfaction (Klotz et al., 2021). Thus, the underpinning understanding is that toxic leadership creates an atmosphere where negative consequences in the academic sector can arise in the long term, leading to a lack of achievements for academic staff and, in turn, the academic performance of students.

The social learning theory suggests that adopting behaviors occurs and is reinforced through observation (Bandura, 1977), which is in line with the current findings. Toxic leaders are negative role models, and they pose a detrimental influence on their employees (e.g., defensive workplace behavior), which lowers their overall job satisfaction. Due to the creation of a hostile workplace by toxic leaders, stress, anxiety, dysfunctionality, and uncertainty are infused into the staff, which lowers their engagement and motivation and ultimately, their job satisfaction (Schilling et al., 2022).

Similarly, LMX theory states that when exchanges between leaders and members maintain equality, they can directly contribute to positive workplace outcomes and vice versa (Harvey et al., 2021). Diminishing trust is vital in this context and agrees with the existing literature, suggesting that destructive, unethical, and poor leadership behaviors



reduce the bonds between the leader and their staff, leading to erosion of commitment and dissatisfaction with the job.

COR theory explains the endeavor of staff to maintain their emotional and mental resources, which are depleted when exposed to a toxic leader, leading to higher stress levels and uncivil behaviors at work (Koltz et al., 2021). Toxic culture at work steers employees towards burnout and dissatisfaction as it prevents them from replenishing their resources, which is supported by the current findings. This answers the questions posed in this study regarding the negative and detrimental effects of toxic leaders in the academic sector of the Middle East, where job satisfaction and trust are jeopardized, and thus, the wellbeing of academic staff is harmed. This can also be linked to the hierarchical and collectivist cultures in the region that further encourages such leadership behaviors (Tariq & Ding, 2022).

## 5. Conclusions

The current research focuses on the importance of job satisfaction as a vital element for the wellbeing of academic staff. This is particularly analyzed in the presence of toxic leaders, who evidently have dire negative impacts on the psychological factors of their employees as well as the physical and environmental factors of the workplace (i.e., organizational culture). In this respect, the current findings show how trust can be diminished in the presence of toxic leaders as they spread toxins via their behaviors that can be abusive, unethical, and authoritarian. These characteristics impact how the organization conducts tasks internally and infuse the workplace with unethical means of conduct that yield a lack of trust and jeopardize wellbeing due to stress, anxiety, and other issues such as conflict or burnout. It is important to note that similar findings have been reported in the extant literature, which support the current results (A. Alanezi, 2024; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Saleem et al., 2021; Smith & Fredricks-Lowman, 2020). Notably, the current research contributes to the literature of leadership and its impacts on employees' psychological wellbeing by obtaining empirical evidence that addresses the issue. It is also important to note that there are other studies that, while examining different factors, show consensus with current results in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on academic staff and its negative psychological outcomes (e.g., Agha, 2021; Bingham & Bubb, 2021; Telyani et al., 2021; Khawand & Zargar, 2022; Koo et al., 2022; Simard & Parent-Lamarche, 2022). This research focuses on job satisfaction of academic staff under the supervision of toxic leaders among Middle Eastern universities. Following what was mentioned, there are theoretical and practical implications that can be derived from current findings. These are highlighted in the following sections.

## 6. Theoretical Implications

As social exchange theory is included in the current context, it can be observed that toxic leaders are incapable of being appropriate role models for their followers, which is inherent in their behavior. This is further combined with the narcissistic, abusive, self-promoting, unpredictable, and controlling nature of toxic leaders. It is argued that social exchange does not occur under toxic leadership, or it occurs in a negative manner (Saleem et al., 2021; A. Alanezi, 2024; Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021; Bandura, 1977; Zhou et al., 2021). This is further linked to the psychological wellbeing of employees as they are under pressure from a leader who, with the aforementioned characteristics, negatively impacts the workplace and individuals' work processes. Various negative outcomes, such as burnout, stress, lack of motivation and engagement, and turnover, can occur due to the toxic behavior of leaders in an academic setting. This is also related to the context of COR theory, which entails experiencing stress due to a perceived lack of abilities or resources, whether mental or physical. As toxic leaders can request unreasonable tasks or deadlines, employees can feel stress, which directly affects their job satisfaction and wellbeing.

The effect of toxic leaders on organizational culture (i.e., environment, mission, socialization, information, and strategy) is vividly impactful on available resources for staff in a highly demanding sector (i.e., education). Arguably, an unethical, unhealthy, and devalued organizational culture is highly influential on the job satisfaction of employees, particularly in an academic setting. This implies that commitment, engagement, interactions among staff (and to extension among staff and students) and their trust are hindered through the existence of toxic leaders and their significant influence on organizational culture and trust (Winn & Dykes, 2019; Rasool et al., 2020; Saleem et al., 2021; Oden et al., 2019). Lastly, the LMX theory that is embedded in the current study pertains to the element of trust based on interactions between the leader and each employee. The current results show that toxic leaders can lower trust as their negative approach and characteristics lead to undesirable psychological outcomes for individuals. As mentioned earlier, interactions between toxic leaders and their subordinates can be hostile, abusive, one-sided, and stress-inducing. This, in turn, leads to an environment (i.e., workplace) where trust cannot manifest as socialization, and the flow of information in the organization is negatively influenced by the toxic behavior of the leader. Similar results have been noted throughout the extant literature from different perspectives and contexts (e.g., Behery et al., 2019; Matos et al., 2018; Winn & Dykes, 2019; Milosevic et al., 2020; Harris & Jones, 2018; Labrague et al., 2020). The current research provides empirical evidence about toxic leaders and their impact on the psychological wellbeing of academic staff, which contributes to the literature of leadership, organizational behavior, and culture. Furthermore, there are several aspects drawn from current findings that can be beneficial for practitioners, which are mentioned in the following section.

## 7. Practical Implications

The current research shows how negatively influential toxic leaders can be within the academic setting and particularly, during and after a crisis (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic), which has had severe impacts on both physical and psychological domains of human lives. Notably, it can be argued that organizations' decision-makers in universities have a responsibility to first identify any toxic leader in their companies to ensure that the damage is ceased. Importantly, as toxic leaders deeply impact organizational culture in their workplace through bad role modeling and abusive behavior, it becomes a significant challenge for new leaders to change the environment and create a healthy workplace for their staff. Thus, academic organizations should provide the equipment and means necessary to implement change management after eliminating a toxic leader. This pertains to the importance of organizational culture, which was noted in the current research. Additionally, organizations should focus on developing managers by enhancing their work environment. This can be achieved and boosted via Human Resource Management initiatives that address employees' overall wellbeing and personal and professional development.

To provide additional support during crises, universities can provide training and counseling services to their staff to reduce stress and anxiety and enhance wellbeing both physically and psychologically. University decision-makers can also focus on training new leaders who understand the goals of the organization and conduct their roles under ethical means. This can have long-term benefits for the organization and impact its trust-building process with employees. Due to the dire effects of toxic leaders on trust, it becomes imperative that commitment, loyalty, engagement, and citizenship behaviors are taken into consideration in creating new strategies for employees. This can establish an environment where toxins remaining from the toxic leader can be removed, and, thus, the job satisfaction of academic staff is raised. In turn, this yields a more positive educational atmosphere for students and their learning process.

Implementation of development programs that emphasize ethical and constructive leadership practices is a necessity for Middle Eastern universities. The boards are to establish policies that help to identify and mitigate toxic traits in the managerial and leadership levels so that administrative staff and faculty members are provided with an environment of freedom, innovation, and professional development. Transparent policies and practices, and trust-building initiatives with open communication between leaders and staff can also be a major element for improving the workplace and detoxifying the organization. Leaders should be evaluated, and their behaviors should be monitored to avoid promoting and motivating toxic traits. Interventions, mentorship programs, and coaching can be the means for restoring the organizational culture into a healthy workplace by considering the organizational culture and trust in leaders as mediating elements. Through such actions, not only can the job satisfaction of the academic staff be improved, but further academic standards can be enhanced to serve the students and the nation.

## 8. Limitations and Recommendations

The current research is limited by several factors, which, although constraining the conduct of this study, open new pathways for other scholars to examine the subject in the future. These are namely (a) the quantitative nature of the data is limited in terms of accuracy of the data and generalizability, which can be complemented by qualitative studies that gather in-depth data; (b) the data were collected in a cross-sectional manner, and thus, we are unable to determine the temporal link among variables, which can be addressed by longitudinal studies in the future that address changes in time (pre and post toxic leaders) in academic or other settings; (c) limited number of existing pieces of literature on the subject and particularly, in the context of Middle East, which calls for further analyses and research in the region to provide comparative results; (d) several theories that are linked to the current context are not included (e.g., vertical dyad linkage theory, chaos theory, social identity theory, and commitment–trust theory), which can be included in future studies pertaining to the current issue; and (e) cultural elements are not included in the current research as they fall beyond its scope of conduct. The effect and importance of cultural differences can be addressed by future studies to further contribute to the current understanding of toxic leaders and the psychological wellbeing of their employees.

In addition to what was noted, the sample of academic staff limits the generalizability of the findings to other sectors and regions, which can be addressed by future studies to understand whether similar patterns emerge in different cultural and/or organizational contexts. Furthermore, response bias of self-reported data should be addressed, which can be avoided through longitudinal studies with objective measures for performance assessment and the effects of toxic leadership on the wellbeing of employees over time. Moderating factors such as resilience, coping mechanisms, and individual characteristics are not included in the current model, which can be explored by future studies to reveal the influences of personality, emotional intelligence, and the ability of staff to cope with and navigate a toxic workplace. Lastly, remote or hybrid workplaces are increasingly deployed in the academic sector. Future studies can examine the manifestation of toxic leadership in virtual workplaces and their impact on employee performance, wellbeing, and other behavioral outcomes.

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