

Leadership's dark side: Examining the links between toxic leadership, burnout, and job satisfaction in South African organisations

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Abstract

Individuals are exposed to various factors that might influence their performance and conduct when joining work environments. Managers' leadership style has been identified as one of these influential factors. Past research has linked toxic leadership to various negative outcomes for an organisation's employees. Building on previous research that established this relationship, the current study used a quantitative lens to examine the relationships between toxic leadership, burnout and job satisfaction. This investigation used three different scales: the Schmidt Toxic Leadership Scale (TL-15), the Burnout Assessment Scale (BAT12), and the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ17). Employees from various organisations in South Africa participated in the self-report survey (n= 96). Pearson's correlation analysis confirmed the hypotheses that toxic leadership and burnout are positively related and that toxic leadership and job satisfaction are negatively related. Practical and theoretical implications and recommendations for future research are presented.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Organisations must address factors negatively influencing productivity and performance to survive in today's competitive market. Job satisfaction and mental wellbeing are crucial for employee productivity. Various aspects affect mental health, including genetics, experiences, and contextual factors (Hajak et al., 2021). The work environment introduces 'job stressors' and 'hygiene factors' that can negatively impact mental health (Memish et al., 2017). Job stressors significantly contribute to employees' emotional resource depletion (Hadadian & Zarei, 2016), potentially leading to burnout (Zheng et al., 2021). Leitão et al. (2021) found burnout moderates productivity due to emotional exhaustion and professional ineffectiveness.

Leadership, a workplace hygiene factor, influences employee wellbeing and job satisfaction and is a key predictor of organisational goal achievement (Koropets et al., 2020). Competent leaders reduce burnout by promoting engagement and maintaining a healthy work environment (Wei et al., 2020). Leadership styles can positively or negatively impact employees and organisations (Tang, 2019). Destructive and toxic leadership styles decrease employee motivation and job satisfaction (Uysal, 2019). Uzunbacak et al. (2019) reported a significant positive relationship between toxic leadership and employee burnout. However, limited data exists testing toxic leadership with burnout and job satisfaction (Budak & Erdal, 2022).

1.2. Problem Statement

This study examined the relationship between toxic leadership, burnout, and job satisfaction. Because toxic leadership has a negative influence on employees' wellbeing and performance, it affects the profitability of an organisation. Left unchecked, not only does toxic leadership damage individuals but it can ultimately influence organisational sustainability. The insights from this study have implications for people management departments and contribute to the literature on toxic leadership's effects on employee job satisfaction and mental health. The findings can provide important indicators for organisations to address toxicity levels in their leaders, potentially reducing burnout and improving job satisfaction. Additionally, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how leadership styles impact employee wellbeing and organisational performance in today's challenging business environment. The paper is organised as follows: a literature review is presented, followed by a discussion on the methods used in the study. The results are presented and discussed, and conclusions drawn. Practical and theoretical implications and recommendations for future research are explored.

1.3. Research objectives

The research objectives of the study are to investigate the relationship between toxic leadership and burnout, as well as to determine the relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Toxic leadership

Leaders contribute a unique personal style that permeates their actions and serves as a lens for viewing organisational activity (Tang, 2019). A positive, functional leadership style drives organisational effectiveness and improves efficiency (Ramdas & Patrick, 2019). However, when leadership becomes dysfunctional, it negatively affects subordinates' productivity, motivation, and overall health (Bakkal et al., 2019). Mehraein et al. (2023) identified three perspectives in toxic leadership research: emphasising the leadership process, focusing on negative outcomes, or considering both outcomes and enabling processes. These authors defined toxic leadership as a process causing significant, long-lasting harm to followers and organisations through dysfunctional leadership behaviour. This study adopts the second perspective, focusing on toxic leadership's impact on individuals.

The term 'toxic leader' encompasses a wide range of perceptions and characteristics. Wicker (1996) first described toxic leaders as maladjusted bullies exhibiting narcissism and abuse towards subordinates, showing little concern for their welfare. Schmidt (2008) expanded on this, proposing five characteristics: authoritarian leadership, abusive control, narcissism, self-promotion, and unpredictability. Walker and Watkins (2022) supported these findings, noting that toxic leaders lack self-control, exhibit unkindness, and ignore others' needs. Despite varying categorisations, there is high consistency in defining toxic leaders' traits. These behaviours develop and are reinforced over time through external factors (Mehraein et al., 2023).

Toxic leadership affects both organisations and the individuals within them. It fuels organisational cynicism (Singh et al., 2022), decreases organisational commitment and fosters job dissatisfaction and poor work-related attitudes among subordinates (Gravili et al., 2022; Hoobler & Hu, 2013; Templer, 2018; Walker & Watkins, 2022). Research suggests that toxic leaders cause significant distress to employees and organisations, contributing to the decline of subordinates' emotional resources (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). This destructive leadership style often persists due to the lack of organisational attention. In addition, while toxic leadership is generally harmful, some organisations may perceive short-term benefits. These are: increased short-term productivity due to fear-driven motivation (Hadadian & Zarei, 2020); quick decision-making in crisis situations (Milosevic et al., 2020); temporary financial gains through, for example, cost-cutting measures (Boddy, 2017); and reduced employee turnover in poor job markets (Johansen & Christiansen, 2020). However, these benefits are

often unsustainable and outweighed by long-term negative consequences. Burnout and job dissatisfaction, two consequences of toxic leadership, can stem from a work environment that sustains such leadership styles.

The pervasive nature of toxic leadership can create a vicious cycle within organisations. As employees experience increased stress and decreased job satisfaction, their performance may suffer, potentially reinforcing the toxic leader's negative perceptions and behaviours. This cycle of negative reinforcement can lead to a toxic organisational culture that becomes increasingly difficult to change. Moreover, the impact of toxic leadership can extend beyond the workplace, affecting employees' personal lives and overall wellbeing (Pelletier, 2010). This spillover effect can result in increased healthcare costs for organisations and society at large. Recognising and addressing toxic leadership is crucial not only for organisational success but also for the broader societal implications of workplace health and productivity.

2.2 Burnout

Burnout is an individual's response to experiencing chronic work stress, leading to both physical and psychological alterations (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). These health alterations manifest within multiple spheres such as attitudinal, emotional, and cognitive (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Observing workers who showed signs of exhaustion and negative attitudes towards their job led to the definition of burnout as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishments" (Maslach & Jackson, 1984, p. 134).

As a syndrome, burnout comprises three dimensions. The first is emotional exhaustion, which manifests as exhaustion and tiredness (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). A second dimension is depersonalisation, where the employee responds to the work being performed with disregard and detachment. Lastly, reduced personal achievements lead to a negative self-evaluation regarding job performance, which translates into decreased productivity and lower coping skills (Islam et al., 2021).

Xu and Farris (2022) reported that communication and leadership are two organisational factors that play an important role in the development of burnout in employees. These organisational factors work alongside individual factors to either mitigate or aggravate the burnout state (Shoman et al., 2021). When employees experience burnout, it results in significant costs for the individual and the organisation (Grow et al., 2019). At an individual level, constant emotional exhaustion and cynicism give rise to negative emotional states. This impacts employees in multiple spheres, such as their work and home life, interpersonal relationships, and overall health (Desart & De Witte, 2019). Burnout arising in the organisational context will also result in negative outcomes for the organisation, such as a decrease in employee productivity.

2.3 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a broad term that encompasses various factors that influence work conditions, resulting in an increase in employee motivation and productivity (Uysal, 2019). Locke (1969) provides a popular definition suggesting it is the positive emotional state that an individual experiences after evaluating their work and job experiences. There are two identified sources of job satisfaction. The first source is internal; this considers factors such as the individual's level of education, development opportunities and status within the organisation (Bakkal et al., 2019). The second source is external and dependent on leadership style, environment, and other job-related dimensions. When one's expectations within those various dimensions are met, job satisfaction will be experienced. If the expectations are not met, job dissatisfaction among employees can occur.

Job satisfaction has been analysed by various research studies because of its influence on employee performance. Due to the complex relationship between satisfaction and performance, two schools of thought have emerged. The first suggests there is no direct link between satisfaction and performance. The second argument positively relates job satisfaction to performance, with motivation being the influencing factor (Jalagat, 2016). Spector (1997) positively related job satisfaction with performance and identified three vital features that occur when job satisfaction is achieved. These three features create a clear link between leadership, employee wellbeing and organisational effectiveness.

2.4 Toxic Leadership and Burnout

Kılıç and Günsel (2019) analysed the effects that destructive forms of leadership have on employees, reporting that organisational commitment and performance have an interconnected relationship. Those two factors were also identified as being negatively affected by toxic leadership (Okray & Şimşek, 2020). Uzunbacak et al. (2019) found that, in a sample of blue-collar workers, employees reported experiencing both toxic leadership and a negative mood. Within the same sample, the leadership styles that their leaders practised were identified as narcissistic and authoritarian. Çetinkaya and Ordu (2018) reported a significant relationship between burnout levels of employees and toxic leadership.

A clear relationship between toxic leadership and employee burnout has been established (Budak & Erdal, 2022; Leary et al., 2013). The following hypothesis was adopted regarding the relationship between burnout and toxic leadership:

H1: Toxic leadership has a significant positive relationship with burnout.

2.5 Toxic Leadership and Job Satisfaction

Leadership practices and policies be a major determining factor in job satisfaction (Hajdukova et al., 2015). Plenty of research investigates how toxic leadership creates toxic organizational environments (Fosse et al., 2019; Indradevi, 2016; Mackey et al., 2021). Job satisfaction is one way to expose toxic leadership's effects (Mackey et al., 2021).

Labrague et al. (2020) reported a negative relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction, absenteeism, and psychological distress. Bakkal et al. (2019) found a negative correlation between toxic leadership perceptions and job satisfaction after sampling 658 healthcare workers. Wolor et al. (2022) tested whether toxic leadership influences workplace factors, including job satisfaction and performance. They found that toxic leadership affects both factors in a significantly negative manner. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis was adopted:

H2: Toxic leadership has a significant negative relationship with job satisfaction.

3. Research Methodology

A cross-sectional correlational design was employed to test the hypotheses. By examining the relationships among toxic leadership, job satisfaction, and burnout, the researchers aimed to elucidate the direction and strength of these associations (Stangor, 2014). Quantitative data collection through self-report surveys was deemed most appropriate, as it allowed for efficient sampling of multiple participants within a limited timeframe. This method facilitated the gathering of standardised data across various organisations, enabling statistical analyses and potentially encouraging more candid responses on sensitive topics.

3.1 Sample and participants

A non-probability convenience sampling method, specifically snowball sampling, was utilised. This approach facilitated swift and cost-effective participant selection (Privitera, 2022). Eligibility criteria included South African citizenship and formal sector employment. The online survey was developed using Qualtrics (2023). Participant recruitment occurred via the first author's social media accounts on platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. A study invitation poster was disseminated, outlining the research aims and requirements, alongside a clickable link to the online survey. Participants were encouraged to share the link with other eligible individuals, thus expanding the potential sample pool. This method, whilst not without limitations, allowed for efficient data collection across diverse organisations and sectors within the constraints of the study.

A total of 109 individuals responded to the study invitation. Eight responses were removed from the sample, as they failed to complete one or more of the scales in the questionnaire. Mahalanobis distance analysis was conducted, and five additional participants were removed after being identified as extreme responders. The final sample therefore comprised 96 participants. A total of (60.4%, n= 58) participants identified as female, (38.5%, n= 37) as male and 1% (n= 1) as non-binary. The age range of participants was between 18 years old and 65 years old. Close to half of the sample (47.9%, n= 46) was in the 20-29-year-old age group. Most participants (52.1%, n= 50) were Afrikaans home language speakers, with (40.6%, n= 39) English speakers. Other home languages indicated were Sesotho (3.1%, n= 3), Tswana (3.1%, n= 3) and lastly, IsiZulu (1%, n= 1).

Participants worked in over 14 industries, with the following distribution: finance (26%, n= 25), education (16.7%, n= 16) and telecommunications (13.5%, n= 13). Fields not listed on the questionnaire but reported were human resources and advertising services reported by approximately (12.5%, n = 12) of participants. The highest educational attainment reported was the master's degree level (9.4%, n= 9). This was followed by bachelor's degree (42.7%, n= 41), post-school qualifications (25%, n= 24) and high-school diploma (4.2%, n= 4). Many participants indicated that their employment tenure at their current organisation ranged between 1-5 years (41.7%, n= 40). While (27.1%, n= 26) of the overall sample stated they had been with their organisation for less than one year. Other participants reported tenure periods of between 11-15 years (8.3%, n=8) and 20 or more years (7.3%, n= 7). The smallest proportion of participants (4.2%, n= 4) reported a tenure period of between 16-20 years.

The largest number of participants, (65.6%, n= 63) reported their job level as ranging from entry-level to junior management. Senior (15.6%, n= 15) and middle management (16.7%, n= 16) accounted for the second and third most reported job level categories. The financial advisor, job role, was not included in the questionnaire, but (2%, n= 2) of the sample identified with this role. Most participants reported they were employed full-time (87.5%, n= 84), while (6.3%, n= 6) indicated part-time employment status or being contract employees (5.2%, n= 5) Finally, (1%, n= 1) noted that they were self-employed.

3.2 Measurement instruments

After the questionnaire invitation page, participants completed a self-developed demographic questionnaire. After that, statements on toxic leadership, burnout and job satisfaction followed. The chosen measurement tools are briefly discussed.

3.2.1 Toxic Leadership Scale

The study employed Schmidt's (2014) Toxic Leadership Scale (TL-15), a condensed 15-item version of the original 30-item instrument. This scale uses a five-point Likert format, ranging from 1 ("never") to 5 ("always"). The TL-15 has been recently applied in two studies examining toxic leadership within South Africa, demonstrating high reliability. For instance, Middleton (2018) reported an alpha coefficient of 0.98. Sample items from the scale include: "My leader/manager/supervisor accepts credit for success that does not belong to them"; and "My leader/manager/supervisor publicly belittles employees".

3.2.2 The Burnout Assessment Tool-12

The Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT-12) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2019) was used to measure burnout. This instrument assesses using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "never" and 5 represents "always". Examples of items from the BAT-12 include: "At work I feel physically

exhausted"; and "When I am working, I have trouble concentrating". The BAT-12 has demonstrated reliability and validity in the South African context. De Beer et al. (2022a) reported a reliability score of $\alpha = 0.70$ when applying the tool to a South African population. Furthermore, De Beer et al. (2022b) found good cross-cultural validity for the BAT-12 and strong evidence of convergent validity ($\alpha = 0.92$).

3.2.3 *Job satisfaction- Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire*

A shortened 17-item version of the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire was used to measure job satisfaction (MSQ17) (Weiss et al., 1967). This questionnaire was chosen because it reliably measures job satisfaction amongst different demographic variables in the South African population (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2010). The MSQ utilises a short 5-point Likert scale to measure participants' satisfaction with their employment (1= very dissatisfied to 5= very satisfied). The reliability and validity alphas within the South African context are reported between 0.79-0.85, indicating excellent reliability and validity (Buitendach & Rothmann, 2009). Oosthuizen et al. (2016) reported Cronbach's alpha of .89 in their study of job satisfaction within the South African population, providing additional proof that this scale is reliable for use within the South African population.

3.3 **Statistical Analysis**

Data was analysed using the SPSS 28 statistical software programme. First, the reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha analysis. After that, descriptive statistics were generated to enable hypothesis testing to commence. Pearson's correlation coefficients were used to test the hypotheses.

3.4 **Ethics**

The relevant university's Ethics Committee approved the study and issued the ethics number COM/00195/2023. Privacy and anonymity were ensured by not requiring participants to provide any identifying information. No monetary compensation was provided for participation, and participants could voluntarily withdraw from the study at any stage without negative sanction. A debriefing letter was included as the questionnaire addressed a subject matter that was deemed sensitive. If participants experienced distress, they were encouraged to contact the primary investigator, whose contact details were also provided. All data was password-protected during the entire duration of the study and analysis. After the raw data was processed for statistical testing, it was destroyed.

4. **Results and Findings**

4.1 **Internal consistency and descriptive statistics**

Cronbach's alpha (α) was used to assess the internal consistency (reliability) of the three scales. As seen in Table 1, all three scales demonstrated good to excellent internal consistency. All scales were treated as unidimensional.

Table 1 furthermore displays the descriptive statistics. The toxic leadership and burnout scale mean scores were below the scale's midpoint, indicating participants experienced below-average levels of toxic leadership and burnout. The job satisfaction scale mean score was marginally above the midpoint, showing that participants had slightly above-average levels of job satisfaction. Lastly, regarding normality, the toxic leadership and burnout scales are positively skewed, with burnout being highly positively skewed. The job satisfaction scale is highly negatively skewed. The kurtosis statistic for the toxic leadership scale is less than 0, indicating it is platykurtic (Wilson & MacLean, 2011) Both the burnout and job satisfaction scales have leptokurtic distributions due to the kurtosis statistic being more significant than 0.

Table 1: Internal consistency and descriptive statistics

	Cronbach alpha	M	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
				Statistic	SE	Statistic	SE
Toxic leadership	.952	2.40	1.11	.57	.246	-1.07	.488
Burnout	.889	2.21	.67	1.04	.246	1.27	.488
Job satisfaction	.893	3.61	.63	-.711	.246	.740	.488

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum; Max = maximum; SE = standard error

4.2 Correlation Analysis Results

To interpret the results of the analysis, the guidelines of Cohen (1988) were adopted. The Pearson correlations appear in Table 2.

Table 2: Pearson Product-Moment Correlations Between Variables

Variable	Toxic leadership	Burnout
Toxic Leadership		
Burnout	.514**	
Job Satisfaction	-.616**	-.161**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Source. Authors own work

The data analysis accepted all proposed hypotheses. There is a significant strong positive relationship between toxic leadership and burnout ($r=.514$; $p \leq .10$), while a significant, strong negative relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction ($r= -.616$; $p \leq .10$). This confirms hypotheses 1 and 2.

5. Implications

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study provides supplementary information regarding toxic leadership and the relationship it has with burnout and job satisfaction. Increased understanding of what influences employees' level of

burnout and job satisfaction is important. These are job stressors and workplace hygiene factors that can influence productivity at work and other organisational outcomes (Memish et al., 2017). The present results affirm the conclusions of previous research in this area that show how toxic leadership can negatively affect employees' burnout and job satisfaction, which can lead to difficulties in fulfilling organisational obligations. While research on the effects of toxic leadership on job satisfaction exists (Baloyi, 2020; Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020; Paltu, 2020), this study provides an important contribution as it includes the individual factor of burnout in the relationship between toxic leadership and job satisfaction.

5.2 Practical implications

The study's findings offer significant practical and managerial implications for organisations. People management departments can utilise these results to assess the impact of toxic leadership by examining levels of employee burnout and job satisfaction (Mehraein et al., 2023). This information can be instrumental in addressing toxic behaviours exhibited by leaders and informing leadership training programmes to prevent the development of toxic leadership styles. Organisations should implement comprehensive evaluation processes that include assessments of burnout and job satisfaction, as these factors can serve as predictors of toxic leadership levels (Memish et al., 2017). Senior managers and people management departments need to be aware that toxic leadership negatively affects employees' burnout and job satisfaction, potentially leading to difficulties in fulfilling organisational obligations (Baloyi, 2020; Hadadian & Zarei, 2016; Paltu & Brouwers, 2020). By addressing toxic leadership, organisations can potentially improve employee wellbeing, job satisfaction, and overall productivity. This aligns with the findings of Wolor et al. (2022), who found that toxic leadership significantly affects workplace factors, including job satisfaction and performance. Furthermore, organisations – including business schools – should consider incorporating these findings into their leadership development programmes. By fostering awareness of the detrimental effects of toxic leadership on burnout and job satisfaction, companies can cultivate more positive leadership styles that promote employee engagement and maintain a healthy work environment (Wei et al., 2020). This proactive approach can contribute to creating a more positive organisational culture and improving overall organisational effectiveness.

6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

6.1 Conclusions

Due to the significant way in which leadership contributes to employees' levels of job satisfaction and mental wellbeing at work, the current study sought to investigate whether a relationship exists between toxic leadership, burnout, and job satisfaction. Notwithstanding the acknowledged limitations of the research, the study's findings provide researchers and practitioners with valuable insights into

the relationship between toxic leadership, burnout, and job satisfaction. Results indicate that there is a relationship between toxic leadership and burnout and toxic leadership and job satisfaction. Additionally, employee levels of burnout and job satisfaction can predict the level of toxic leadership within organisations. It is thus important for practitioners to include burnout and job satisfaction during their evaluation processes and during training and development programmes to address how leadership styles, such as toxic leadership, affect employees in organisations.

6.2 Limitations and future research

Although the main objective of the current study was to investigate if there was a naturally occurring relationship between the three variables, it may be useful for future investigations to adopt a longitudinal qualitative design. This will enable researchers to unearth underlying themes that may only manifest in the long term and identify potential further variables in the experiences of employees. Bias was another limiting factor. The chosen sampling method of non-probability convenience sampling may have led to the introduction of bias in the sample. This may have resulted in a non-representative sample which did not accurately reflect the broader population. However, the choice of sample method was deemed most appropriate due to time constraints. Future research may find it useful to adopt a probability sampling method.

Lastly, because of limited available resources and sample size, a detailed examination of the relationship between the different dimensions in which all three variables could be categorised was not conducted. This may have overlooked the fact that one dimension might be more influential than another. It would be beneficial for future studies to replicate the current study and also conduct a detailed analysis of the relationship between different dimensions of toxic leadership, burnout, and job satisfaction.

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