

**RESEARCH PAPER****Psychological Hardiness: A Double-Edged Sword in Despotic Leadership-Employee Performance Relationship****¹Muhammad Ali, ²Dr. Nadeem Uz Zaman and ³Dr. Ammarah Ahmed**

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Corresponding Author: muhammad.ali1@buitms.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This study explores role of despotic leadership in shaping employee performance with mediating role of job shirking and moderating role of psychological hardiness. There is paucity of research on despotic leadership-employee performance relationship. The study expanded the literature on this relationship in Pakistan. This study employed multi-source and time-lagged data from 448 employees was collected from leader-subordinate dyads, in the banking sector of Pakistan. Results indicated that despotic leadership negatively influences employee performance. Mediating role of job shirking in despotic leadership-job/task performance relationship was conditionally supported, moderating role of psychological hardiness in despotic leadership-job/ task-performance relationship was supported, moderating role of psychological hardiness in despotic leadership-job shirking relationship was not supported and the moderating role of psychological hardiness in job shirking-job/task-performance relationship was supported but in opposite direction. Findings emphasized the need of understanding psychological hardiness and mitigating the effects of despotic leadership in organizations.

KEYWORDS Despotic Leadership, Job Shirking, Task Performance, Psychological Hardiness**Introduction**

Organizations are currently experiencing intense rivalry all over the world and are becoming increasingly aware of the significance of their human resources in achieving and sustaining competitive advantage (Suprayitno, 2024). In today's business environment, it is necessary for employees to possess the ability to perform effectively so that their organizations can stay in competition and achieve their goals (Al Wali et al., 2023). Employee performance is a set of employee behaviors that contribute favorably to the attainment of organizational goals. Many factors can affect employee performance and leadership is one such factor that can play an important role in shaping employee performance (Nuchpramool et al., 2025; Donkor & Zhou, 2020).

Existing literature shows that there is a wide variety of leadership styles and characteristics that can affect the attitudes, motivation and performance of followers (Aryanti & Perkasa, 2024). Moreover, it has also been widely discussed how leadership styles such as transformational leadership, transactional authoritative, laissez faire, democratic, servant leadership, empowering leadership and authentic leadership positively affect employee outcomes (Lotfi et. al, 2023; Rojak et al., 2024).

Recent studies have indicated that leadership also entails some dark aspects that can be harmful to employees (Mahmood et.al, 2024; Shahzad et al., 2025). However, little attention has been paid to examine the impacts of this side of leadership (Khan & Saeed, 2024; Khizer et al.,2024; Sanm, & Khan, 2024). Despotic leadership is one such destructive style of leadership. It refers to the activities of a leader who is motivated by self-interest and is aimed at obtaining power, dominance and superiority over others, especially over the

subordinates (Shahzad et al., 2025). Among different negative leadership styles, despotic leadership is considered as the most dangerous one, as despotic leaders are self-centered and they work only for their own interests, disregarding the interests of their employees, thus treating them unethically if needed. Although studies have established a link between despotic leadership and employee performance (Dar et al., 2024), however the mechanisms that link despotic leadership to employee performance remain largely unexplored.

Employees, when faced with stressors at workplace, are expected to cope in some way in order to keep performing at their optimum levels. One such coping mechanism is based on the ability of an individual to cope with stress and transform challenge into opportunity for growth, and this ability is known as psychological hardiness (Hedrick et al., 2025). Psychological hardiness is an attribute that allows the individual to convert threat into opportunity by using characteristics such as commitment, control and challenge (Altinsoy & Aypay, 2023). As a stress management ability, psychological hardiness might play a role in dealing with despotic leadership behavior as well, thus maintaining employee performance. Job shirking is yet another employee behavior that refers to intentionally putting less effort towards their assigned tasks, this withdrawal behavior of employees for their duties, is referred to as job shirking (Kidwell & Robie, 2003). The present study therefore intended to investigate despotic leadership's direct and indirect relationship with job shirking and task performance with the mediating and moderating role of psychological hardiness. The study was carried out in the context of Pakistan especially as the studies on despotic leadership in Pakistan are scarce (Dar, 2024; Mubarak, 2024; Raza et al., 2024). Besides, literature has also suggested that the causes and consequences of negative leadership in high power distance cultures/countries (Raja et al, 2020) such as Pakistan need to be studied so that the negative impacts of such leadership styles could be identified and managed.

Literature Review

Theoretical foundations

Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) has been employed as the theoretical foundation for the present research. COR has several principles and related corollaries. For example, the central principle of this theory proposes that individuals possess a limited number of resources, such as time, energy and mental peace which can be depleted by stressors/stress inducing situations. When individuals feel that their resources are near depletion, they tend to conserve them. Furthermore, the theory suggests that an investment of personal resources, such as psychological hardiness, protect people from the damaging effects of stressors (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Both these principles were used in the present study to explain how despotic leadership (as a stressor) affects employees and what role psychological hardiness (a personal resource) plays in that process. Nauman et al., (2021) also utilized this theory to posit how and when despotic leadership affects employee performance.

Despotic Leadership, Job Shirking and Employee Performance

The stress and discomfort created by despotic leadership may lead to low motivation and poor performance among employees. One plausible reason for this could be an unremitting exposure to despotic behaviors, that can make employees less enthusiastic, thus affecting the successful execution of their tasks (Gadzali et al., 2025). This drainage of energy caused by stressful situations, such as despotic leadership can refrain employees from devoting sufficient effort to fulfill their job requirements (Nauman et al., 2021). Therefore, an inverse relationship can be predicted between despotic leadership and employees/subordinates' task performance.

Despotic leadership may cause employees/subordinates to hold back effort and perform less well on their jobs. Individuals working under despotic leaders might feel emotionally drained and depleted. Consequently, they may not invest their existing resources (e.g., energy and effort) to complete their tasks. Therefore, we assume that constant exposure to despotic leadership can lead individuals to withhold their effort. Conservation of resources theory also suggests that depletion of one resource can motivate individuals to conserve the existing ones (Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, a positive relationship can be predicted between despotic behaviors of leaders and employees' job shirking behavior. Based on the previous discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1: *Despotic leadership will negatively affect employees/subordinates' task performance.*

Hypothesis 2: *Despotic leadership will positively affect job shirking OR despotic leadership will cause employees to shirk on their jobs.*

Job Shirking and Employee Performance

Using insights from both the seminal and contemporary literature linking effort to performance it can be assumed that a tendency to shirk on job can cause a decline in task performance. This postulation is also supported by conservation of resources theory, which points out that a threat to or actual depletion of resources makes employees unable to give any more input to their jobs (Hobfoll et al., 2018). As effort also epitomizes a resource (Anjum et al., 2022), a decline in it can lead to undesirable outcomes, such as lower performance. Thus, it can be hypothesized that holding back or withdrawing effort will negatively impact one' task performance.

Hypothesis 3: *Employees job shirking will negatively affect their task performance.*

The Mediating Roles of Despotic Leadership and Job Shirking

The study by Nauman et al. (2012) is worth mentioning in that it explicates the role of withdrawal behaviors in linking leadership behaviors to employee performance. Specifically, the study elucidated that the darker aspects of organizational leadership adversely affect employee performance (Celebi et al., 2024) by provoking withdrawal behaviors among employees. In simple words, employees working with despotic leaders might show decreased performance because they tend to withdraw. As we mentioned earlier that job shirking is closely linked with withdrawal behaviors (Kidwell & Robie, 2003), it can mediate the effects of leaders' inappropriate behaviors (despotic leadership) on employees/subordinates' task performance. Thus, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 4: *Job shirking will mediate the effects of despotic leadership on employees/subordinates' task performance.*

The boundary condition/invigorating role of psychological hardiness

Psychological hardiness is a combination of three components: commitment, control and challenge (Kobasa, 1979). These three aspects can play a key role in enhancing individuals' capacity to weather difficulties and transform stressful life situations into chances for personal development and benefit (Maddi et al., 2012). Therefore, it can be assumed that psychological hardiness can attenuate the negative effects of despotic leadership, which represents a stressful situation for employees (Hedrick et al., 2025). Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 5: *Psychological hardiness will attenuate the effects of despotic leadership on task performance.*

Hypothesis 6: *Psychological hardiness will attenuate the effects of despotic leadership on job shirking.*

Further, considering the positive implications of psychological hardiness during stress (Welsh et al., 2025) and its conditional indirect effects (Yu & Liu, 2023), it is also anticipated that a moderated-mediation effect exists, i.e., the indirect effects of despotic leadership will be moderated by psychological hardiness. Therefore, following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 7: *The indirect relationship between despotic leadership and task performance will be positively moderated by psychological hardiness, such that this relationship will be weaker when psychological hardiness is high.*

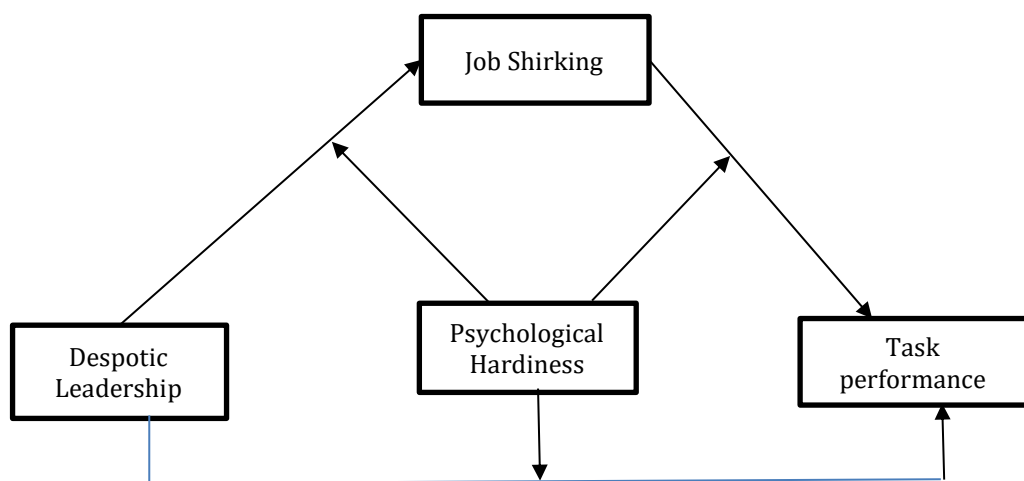


Figure 1 Research framework/ research model.

Methodology

Sample

To test the proposed relationships and minimize the likelihood of issues caused by cross-sectional and single source data as well as to reduce the odds of reverse causality, a multi-source data collection strategy (i.e., employee and supervisor ratings) and a time-lagged design was implemented to collect data from 448 employees from different banks in Pakistan. The organizational structures of banks are naturally nested hierarchies in the shape of teams/branches where a formal relationship of leader-subordinates exists. Therefore, the banks provide a suitable avenue for data collection in this research.

The sensitive nature of data does not allow the researcher to use probability sampling as the subordinates must rate their supervisors also there is no formal sample frame for teams working in banks, so the researcher used convenience sampling for data collection.

Data Collection

The multi-source data was gathered at two different points in time, in the following phases:

Phase one: Data was collected from subordinates regarding their demographics and scales to measure

- (a) perceptions to what extent they perceive their leader as a despotic leader.
- (b) psychological hardiness
- (c) inclination towards job-shirking.

Phase two: Data was collected from leaders regarding their demographics and their subordinates' task/job performance.

Survey matching: Employees were asked to specify their department and designation and identify their leader. The researcher assigned a unique code to each respondent and recorded his/her name while distributing the survey. The unique code was based on the initials of the organization name. This code helped the researcher to accurately identify leaders and administer part two of the overall survey. The information provided by employees or respondents (i.e. designation and department) and recorded by the researcher (i.e. employee name) facilitated in obtaining the leader's rating of employee performance and survey matching.

Instruments

Following scales were used to collect data:

Despotic leadership: Employees' perceptions of the extent to which their leader is despotic was assessed using De Hoogh and Den Hartog's (2008) six-item scale.

Job shirking: Self-rating on job shirking was obtained from employees using three items from the study by Kidwell and Robie (2003).

Psychological hardiness: This construct was measured using six items from the study by Cole et al. (2006).

Task/job performance: Five items from the study by Williams and Anderson (1991) were used to obtain subordinates' task/job performance ratings.

Reliability and Validity

Table 1 and 2 show estimates for data reliability and validity. These results collectively affirm the soundness of the measurement model for further analysis.

To further assess discriminant validity, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) of correlations was analyzed. As shown in table 4, all HTMT values were well below the stringent threshold of 0.85. The highest value observed was 0.641 between Despotic Leadership and Job/Task Performance. These results provide strong additional evidence that the constructs are empirically distinct, reinforcing the discriminant validity of the measurement model.

Table 1
Construct Reliability and Validity through Farnell-Larker Criteria

Constructs	CR	AVE	MSV	Psych. Hardiness	Despotic Leadership	Job/Task Performance	Job Shirking
Psych. Hardiness	0.929	0.686	0.164	0.828			
Despotic Leadership	0.926	0.676	0.401	-0.321***	0.822		
Job/Task Performance	0.884	0.604	0.401	0.405***	-0.633***	0.777	
Job Shirking	0.865	0.681	0.317	-0.075	0.563***	-0.425***	0.825

Table 2
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Analysis

	Psych. Hardiness	Despotic Leadership	Job/Task Performance	Job Shirking
Psych. Hardiness				
Despotic Leadership	0.326			
Job/Task Performance	0.406	0.641		
Job Shirking	0.075	0.571	0.435	

Discriminant validity was established using two criteria. First, following the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of the AVE for each construct (presented on the diagonal of Table 1) was greater than its correlation with any other construct in the model. For instance, the square root of AVE for Despotic Leadership (0.822) is greater than its correlation with Job Shirking (0.563) and Job/Task Performance (-0.633). Second, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations was examined. All HTMT values were well below the conservative threshold of 0.85, with the highest observed ratio being 0.641 between Despotic Leadership and Job/Task Performance. Taken together, these results provide robust evidence for the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the four primary constructs.

Ethical considerations for survey research as laid down in the manual (7th edition) of American Psychological Association (APA) such as informed consent, voluntary participation and assurance regarding the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents' identities and information provided, were followed.

Data Analysis

As this study involves examining complex relationships of the nested data, multilevel structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied to test the purported relationships.

Results and Discussion

Table 3
Demographics

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	254	56.7
	Female	194	43.3
Age (in years)	20-30	123	27.5
	31-40	188	42
	41-50	100	22.3
	51+	37	8.3
Education	High School	35	7.8
	Bachelor's Degree	244	54.5
	Master's Degree	155	34.6
	PhD or Higher	14	3.1
Experience (in years)	0-5	112	25
	6-10	168	37.5
	11-15	97	21.7
	16+	71	15.8
Total		448	100

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Construct Validity

To validate the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS 24 on was conducted. The results indicated an adequate fit of the model to the data. The

primary fit indices were as follows: chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) = 3.989, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.924, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.912, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.082 with a 90% confidence interval of [0.075, 0.088]. The probability of close fit (PCLOSE) was 0.000.1

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	Mean	SD	Despotic Leadership	Job Shirking	Psych. Hardiness	Job/Task Performance
Despotic Leadership	2.6198	1.002	1			
Job Shirking	2.6361	1.063	.511**	1		
Psych. Hardiness	2.6332	1.069	-.302**	-0.067	1	
Job/Task Performance	2.6714	0.981	-.578**	-.379**	.368**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Hypotheses Testing

Analytical Strategy

To test the full set of hypotheses, a moderated mediation framework was employed using Model 59 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Version 3.2). The significance of the conditional indirect effects was assessed using bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals generated from 5,000 bootstrap samples.

Table 5
Results of Moderated-Mediation Path Analysis

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Panel A: Predicting Job Shirking (JS)						
Constant	0.017	0.045	0.37	.713	-0.072	0.105
Despotic Leadership (DL)	0.585	0.043	13.66	<.001	0.501	0.669
Psychological Hardiness (PH)	0.099	0.046	2.17	.030	0.010	0.189
DL × PH (Int_1)	0.051	0.038	1.37	.172	-0.022	0.125
Model Summary: R2 =.272, F (3, 444) = 66.09, p <.001						
Panel B: Predicting Job/Task Performance (JTP)						
Constant	2.701	0.039	70.11	<.001	2.626	2.777
Despotic Leadership (DL)	-0.400	0.051	-7.87	<.001	-0.500	-0.300
Job Shirking (JS)	-0.142	0.047	-2.99	.003	-0.235	-0.048
Psychological Hardiness (PH)	0.218	0.037	5.84	<.001	0.145	0.292
DL × PH (Int_1)	0.116	0.044	2.66	.008	0.030	0.201
JS × PH (Int_2)	-0.097	0.046	-2.13	.034	-0.187	-0.008
Model Summary: R2 =.406, F(5, 442) = 52.72, p <.001						

Note. N = 448. B = unstandardized coefficient. SE = heteroscedasticity-consistent standard error (HC4). LLCI = lower limit of 95% confidence interval. ULCI = upper limit of 95% confidence interval. All predictors involved in interactions were mean-centered.

Table 6
Conditional Indirect Effects of Despotic Leadership on Job/Task Performance via Job Shirking at Values of the Moderator

Moderator: Psychological Hardiness	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Low (-1 SD)	-0.020	0.037	-0.087	0.060
Mean	-0.083	0.027	-0.135	-0.031
High (+1 SD)	-0.157	0.038	-0.231	-0.084

To provide a clear overview of the findings, Table 7 summarizes the results for each of the seven hypotheses tested in this study.

Table 7
Summary of Hypothesized Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	DL will be negatively related to JTP.	Supported
H2	DL will be positively related to JS.	Supported
H3	JS will be negatively related to JTP.	Supported
H4	JS will mediate the DL-JTP relationship.	Supported (Conditionally)
H5	PH will moderate the DL-JTP relationship.	Supported
H6	PH will moderate the DL-JS relationship.	Not Supported
H7	PH will moderate the JS-JTP relationship.	Supported, but in the opposite direction

Note: N = 448. Indirect effects are based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. BootSE = bootstrap standard error. BootLLCI and BootULCI = lower and upper limits of the 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval.

This study intended to explore the relationship between despotic leadership and employee task performance with the mediating role of job shirking and moderating role of psychological hardiness. The results of the study indicated that despotic leadership negatively influences the task performance of the employees. In addition the mediating role of job shirking between despotic leadership and job/task performance was tested which was conditionally supported, moderating role of psychological hardiness between despotic leadership and job/ task performance was tested which was supported, moderating role of psychological hardiness between despotic leadership and job shirking was tested which was not supported and lastly the moderating role of psychological hardiness between job shirking and job/task performance was tested which was supported but in the opposite direction.

The findings of this study are consistent with the previous research on negative leadership behavior and lowered employee performance (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008). Similarly, the current study confirms that despotic leadership is significantly and negatively associated with employee job performance. Leaders, when display self-serving and controlling behavior, create an environment of uncertainty, mistrust and discomfort for the subordinates. In response to these factors employee performance gets negatively affected.

The second hypothesis was also supported, which proposed that despotic leadership may be associated with job shirking. Similar findings have been reported in recent study (ShamsPour et al. 2025), where toxic/negative leadership behavior leads to withdrawal, disengagement and deviant behavior (different forms of job shirking) among employees.

It was also found that job shirking mediated (conditionally) the despotic leadership-employee performance relationship. This partial mediation suggested that not only the direct effect of despotic leadership but indirect effect, through job shirking, is also significant. These findings are consistent with previous research (Wokocho, 2024), suggesting that despotic leaders can reduce employees' willingness and engagement towards their job, ultimately reducing their performance.

The moderating role of psychological hardiness related to despotic leadership and employee performance was found significant, suggesting that thick skinned employees are more composed and focused on their goals and performance, which is similar to findings reported by Mazzetti et al., (2020). Drawing upon Kobasa (1979) propositions, hardiness acts as a buffer for individuals to withstand any stress and taking challenges as opportunities. Psychological hardiness of the employees might have allowed them to consider despotic leadership as a situational factor rather than a personal one, which might have eventually allowed them to stay task focused.

Another interesting result was that psychological hardiness did not moderate the relationship between despotic leadership and job shirking. This non-significant result indicated that even hardy individuals might not stand prolonged despotic leadership behavior. This result resonates with conservation of resource theory (Hobfoll, 1989) which posits that individuals might face resource depletion when prolonged stress is encountered. One possible explanation for this finding is that hardy individuals exhaust their resources by focusing on their performance and are left with no energy to deal with despotic leadership behavior, which eventually results in job shirking.

The most surprising finding of this study was the moderation of psychological hardiness in the relationship between job shirking and job/task performance. The results showed a significant moderation but in opposite direction of what was hypothesized. Contrary to the expectations and previous studies (Mazzetti, 2020; Vagni et al., 2022) psychological hardiness intensified rather than weakened the relationship between job shirking and job/task performance. Plausible explanation for this behavior is that hardy individuals are often high performers so their job shirking may create an internal battle of not achieving their target performance, which consumes a lot of their mental energy and this state leads to a significant decline in their performance. This counter-intuitive result suggests that hardiness may not always work as a buffer in stressful situations, rather it may intensify the negative impact on employee performance by increasing the internal conflict experienced by the employee.

Conclusion

This study extends the literature on leadership and organizational behavior by examining the impact of despotic leadership on employee performance with mediating role of job-shirking and moderating role of psychological hardiness, within a single framework. Empirical evidence of the current study shows that “resource-as-a-shield” modal of COR theory was not supported and is inconsistent with much of the applied research literature. It also explains the motivation of a key principle (protect and gain resource) of COR theory which can lead to poor performance for hardy individuals.

Recommendations

In the present study, only the nested data from banking sector was used, which restricts the generalizability of findings. Future research could employ experimental designs to verify findings of this study in industries and settings other than the banking sector as well. Additionally, future research can focus on identifying the factors associated with development of despotic leadership within organizations, so that this negative behavior could be managed. Finally, qualitative inquiries might also help develop deeper understanding about how employees perceive and respond to despotic leaders.

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