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Despotic Leadership and Workplace Dysfunction in Tourism: A Sequential Mediation Model of Psychological Distress and Work Withdrawal with Cultural and Ethical Boundary Conditions

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Abstract

Despotic leadership—a self-serving, exploitative form of supervisory dominance—is widely recognized as harmful, yet the psychological route linking it to both passive and active workplace dysfunction remains poorly understood, particularly in hospitality. Drawing on the Stressor–Strain–Outcome framework and social exchange theory, this study tests a sequential mediation model in which psychological distress and work withdrawal link despotic leadership to counterproductive work behaviors, with individual traditionality and Islamic work ethics as boundary conditions of the leadership–distress link. Survey data from 441 Saudi national employees of travel agencies and international hotels in Saudi Arabia were analyzed with PLS-SEM (SmartPLS). Despotic leadership was positively associated with distress, withdrawal, and counterproductive behaviors. Distress mediated its associations with both outcomes, and the serial indirect path through distress and withdrawal was small but significant ($\beta = 0.057$, 95% CI [0.024, 0.092]). Both moderators weakened the leadership–distress association, which nonetheless remained positive at high levels of each. Because the data are cross-sectional and single-source, the sequence is theoretically ordered rather than temporally demonstrated. The study clarifies how strain and disengagement jointly connect despotic leadership to deviance, identifies culturally embedded resources that may soften its psychological toll, and offers guidance for leadership development in a rapidly expanding tourism sector.

Keywords: despotic leadership; psychological distress; work withdrawal; counterproductive work behaviors; Islamic work ethics; individual traditionality; tourism and hospitality; stressor–strain–outcome framework; workplace dysfunction; Saudi Arabia; SDGs

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1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia's tourism and hospitality industry is expanding at a remarkable pace. Vision 2030 has placed the sector at the heart of economic diversification and treats it as a major source of employment for Saudi citizens [1], so hotels and travel agencies are absorbing growing numbers of nationals into demanding frontline roles. Expansion on this scale puts the quality of everyday supervision under unusual pressure. Saudi organizational culture has traditionally been marked by high power distance and centralized,

top-down authority [2], and recent expert accounts of the sector single out leadership commitment and organizational culture as decisive conditions for its transformation [3]. We do not claim that despotic supervision is typical of Saudi tourism firms; systematic local evidence on its prevalence does not yet exist, and that absence is itself part of the gap this study addresses. The concern is narrower: where hierarchy is steep and widely accepted, a leader who turns authority toward self-serving ends meets fewer checks, and the employees who answer to such a leader find it harder to object openly. In travel agencies and international hotels, where emotional labor, service co-creation, and guest intimacy are defining features of the business model, despotic leadership turns everyday interactions into sources of strain rather than value, creating a paradox between short-term control and long-term sustainability. Despotic leaders—self-centered, punitive, and dismissive of employees' needs—transform the workplace from a site of engagement into a field of psychological risk [4], with consequences that reverberate from individual well-being to organizational performance and, ultimately, to broader sustainability agendas [5]. Over the past decade, research has tied despotic leadership to thinner job satisfaction, poorer performance, an eroded quality of work life, and a drift toward withdrawal and acquiescent silence [6–10]—reason enough to treat it as an organizational stressor in its own right rather than a matter of managerial temperament.

More recently, the question has shifted from whether despotic leadership harms employees to how that harm travels from the leader's conduct to the employee's behavior. Psychological distress—capturing anxiety, depression, and emotional strain—emerges as a central pathway linking destructive leadership to adverse behavior, as employees confronted with unfair treatment, bullying, and hostile climates carry an invisible emotional burden that eventually surfaces in their conduct [11–13]. Studies have tied despotic leadership to emotional exhaustion, quiet quitting, workplace incivility, and broader forms of deviance, often through distress-related processes [14,15]. Yet the literature remains fragmented in at least three respects: first, work withdrawal and counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) are frequently examined in isolation rather than as interrelated outcomes; second, psychological distress is often treated as a direct mediator for single outcomes rather than as part of a more complex, sequential mechanism; and third, evidence on cultural and ethical boundary conditions—such as Islamic work ethics and individual traditionality—remains scattered and occasionally contradictory. Existing findings hint that cultural and ethical resources matter, but they do not yet offer a coherent explanatory framework for hospitality settings in Muslim-majority contexts. Islamic work ethics, for instance, appear in some studies to buffer the negative effects of despotic leadership on distress, deviance, and adaptability [16,17] but in another to intensify them [18], while individual values such as traditionality and power distance orientation shape how employees interpret and tolerate authoritarian leaders [19–21]. The unresolved question can therefore be stated precisely. When despotic supervision is linked to both withdrawal and counterproductive behavior, are the two simply parallel outlets of the same strain, or does withdrawal form an intermediate step through which distress is carried toward active deviance? Prior studies have usually tested one mediator against one outcome—emotional exhaustion and cynicism leading to CWBs [22], distress leading to behavioral outcomes [11], or withdrawal leading to lower performance [6]—so the serial route from distress through withdrawal to CWBs has been assumed in narrative accounts but not estimated. Nor is it known whether culturally embedded resources such as traditionality and Islamic work ethics act on the first link of that chain, the conversion of a despotic stressor into psychological strain. Without answers to these questions, we cannot explain why some employees respond to despotic leadership with quiet disengagement, others with overtly counterproductive behaviors,

and others still with resilient, ethically anchored coping—least of all in Saudi tourism and hospitality organizations, where this combination of mechanisms has not been examined.

To address these ambiguities, this study aims to develop and empirically test an integrated sequential mediation model in which despotic leadership (DL) influences work withdrawal (WW) and counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) through psychological distress (PD) and work withdrawal, while simultaneously examining individual traditionality (IT) and Islamic work ethics (IWE) as key cultural and ethical moderators of the DL–PD relationship. In doing so, the study seeks not merely to reproduce earlier findings, but to disentangle how a destructive leadership style translates into distinct behavioral trajectories in a context where cultural tradition and religiously grounded ethics are deeply embedded in organizational life. Grounded primarily in the Stressor–Strain–Outcome (SSO) framework, this research conceptualizes despotic leadership as a chronic workplace stressor, psychological distress as the resulting strain, and work withdrawal and CWBs as downstream behavioral outcomes. The SSO logic is enriched with insights from social exchange theory, which emphasizes psychological contract breach and reciprocity norms, and from Islamic work ethics theory, which offers a culturally grounded lens on moral responsibility, patience, and resilience under adverse conditions. The empirical base comprises 441 Saudi national employees of travel agencies and international hotels operating in Saudi Arabia, whose responses to validated scales were modeled with partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 3 to estimate the mediated and moderated paths. This methodological design allows a rigorous test of the proposed conceptual model within a high-contact, service-intensive environment that is both economically significant and theoretically distinctive.

This study offers three interrelated contributions. First, at the theoretical level, it moves beyond single-mediator tests by estimating the full serial pathway from despotic leadership through psychological distress and work withdrawal to CWBs, together with the specific indirect effects through distress alone. This makes it possible to ask whether withdrawal is merely a parallel consequence of strain or also a conduit linking strain to deviance—an ordering that the SSO framework accommodates but does not itself specify. The study further locates individual traditionality and Islamic work ethics at the stressor–strain stage of this chain, as boundary conditions that may help reconcile conflicting evidence about the intensity and direction of despotic leadership effects in culturally nuanced settings [11,16–18,22]. Second, in contextual and methodological terms, it moves the evidence base toward Saudi travel agencies and international hotels—settings of growing strategic weight that dark-leadership research has largely bypassed—and it relies on a sizeable sample and a structural model that estimates both behavioral outcomes jointly, rather than one at a time as much prior work has done. Third, at the managerial level, the findings give hospitality executives evidence-based guidance for recognizing despotic leadership as a risk to employee well-being, and for leveraging cultural resources such as Islamic work ethics and traditional value orientations to design interventions that mitigate destructive leadership, reduce withdrawal and CWBs, and support decent and healthy work.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1. Theoretical Underpinnings

The argument rests on the Stressor–Strain–Outcome (SSO) framework [23], whose core claim is that adverse workplace conditions (stressors) generate psychological strain that subsequently manifests in behavioral outcomes. Within this logic, despotic leadership operates as a salient interpersonal stressor: authoritarian control, self-serving decision-making, and punitive supervision signal a threatening, unpredictable environment that

demands continuous vigilance from employees. These chronic demands exhaust emotional and cognitive resources, giving rise to psychological distress—an internal state characterized by anxiety, tension, and depressive symptoms—which then spills over into observable behaviors such as work withdrawal and counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) [11,22]. Empirical evidence from despotic leadership research consistently supports this stressor–strain–outcome chain, showing that toxic leadership climates foster emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a broad spectrum of dysfunctional behaviors [24,25]. The SSO perspective is particularly compelling in tourism and hospitality settings, yet it cannot simply be imported from generic organizational contexts without modification. Service work in travel agencies and hotels is inherently affective and relational: employees are expected to display warmth, composure, and responsiveness while navigating demanding guests, fluctuating workloads, and often precarious employment conditions. In such hedonic and experiential environments, despotic leadership does more than impose task pressure; it contaminates the emotional climate and disrupts the co-creation of service by undermining employees' sense of dignity and psychological safety. Recent hospitality studies underscore how workload stress, leadership toxicity, and incivility jointly erode innovative behavior and pro-social conduct, reinforcing the notion that strain functions as the key transmission mechanism between destructive leadership and adverse outcomes [24,25]. Consequently, the present study adapts the SSO framework to a hospitality context, treating despotic leadership as a relational stressor that is amplified by the emotional intensity and guest-facing nature of the work. Building on this adapted SSO lens, the study nests its focal constructs within a coherent theoretical structure rather than treating them as isolated variables. Despotic leadership (DL) is conceptualized as a persistent, leader-originating stressor that communicates disrespect, exploitation, and unpredictability, thereby signaling to employees that the psychological contract has been breached. Because several neighboring constructs circulate in this literature, their boundaries need to be drawn with care. Following De Hoogh and Den Hartog [26], DL denotes leadership grounded in personal dominance and authoritarian conduct that serves the leader's own interests, is self-aggrandizing, and exploits subordinates [27]. Its defining features are motivational and moral rather than merely behavioral. Authoritarian leadership, as conceived within the paternalistic tradition, also stresses control and obedience, yet it may be exercised for collective goals and can coexist with benevolence [28]; abusive supervision refers to a sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, whatever its motive [29]; and incivility is low-intensity discourtesy of ambiguous intent that may come from anyone in the organization [30]. A despotic leader need not shout or insult. What sets DL apart is that authority is bent toward private ends, with little regard for the ethical claims of subordinates, which is why it registers as a moral breach and not merely as an unpleasant manner. Psychological distress (PD) is defined here as a non-specific state of anxious and depressive symptoms—nervousness, restlessness, hopelessness, a sense that everything is an effort—experienced over recent weeks [11,12,31]. It is narrower than reduced well-being, which also covers positive functioning, and distinct both from emotional exhaustion, the work-specific depletion of energy at the core of burnout, and from clinical depression, of which depressed mood is only one symptom. Psychological safety, in turn, is a shared belief about interpersonal risk in a work unit, better understood as a resource whose loss may precede distress than as distress itself. Studies of these adjacent constructs are cited below as convergent evidence for the strain process, not as measures of PD. Work withdrawal (WW) follows Hanisch and Hulin [32]: it comprises the behaviors and cognitions through which employees avoid their work tasks while remaining members of the organization—lateness, extended breaks, excuses to leave the workplace, neglect of tasks that carry no consequences, and, in the version used here, thoughts of quitting. Absenteeism, quiet quitting, and turnover intentions are neighboring

forms of withdrawal that inform our reasoning but lie outside the measured domain. CWBs, finally, are volitional acts that violate organizational norms and harm the organization or its members [33]; here they comprise misuse of organizational materials, unauthorized lateness, time theft, arguments with co-workers, and refusal to help them [34]. The line between the two outcomes is one of direction. Withdrawal reduces what the employee gives; CWB takes something away from the organization or from the people in it. Passive reductions in effort are therefore treated here as withdrawal, not as CWB. Both measures happen to include a lateness item, but the CWB item specifies lateness 'without permission', which frames it as an unauthorized breach of rules rather than a retreat from the work role; the two constructs were nonetheless empirically distinct. In this configuration, PD is not merely another outcome; it is the central strain variable through which DL exerts its influence on WW and CWBs, consistent with SSO logic.

Social exchange theory complements this stress-based reasoning by illuminating the relational and moral underpinnings of the DL–outcome link. When leaders habitually violate norms of fairness, respect, and reciprocity, employees perceive a breach in the psychological contract and recalibrate their own contributions accordingly. Reduced reciprocity may take the form of withdrawal—doing the bare minimum, psychologically checking out—or retaliatory behaviors that harm the organization [22,35,36]. Evidence that emotional exhaustion and organizational cynicism carry the effect of despotic leadership through to CWBs suggests that strain and a sense of injustice tend to operate in tandem rather than in isolation. By integrating SSO and social exchange perspectives, the present model explains not only why DL should be associated with WW and CWBs, but also why employees come to view disengagement and deviance as subjectively reasonable responses to a relationship they perceive as exploitative and unfair. Individual difference theories and culturally grounded perspectives further refine the model by introducing boundary conditions that shape how the SSO and social exchange processes unfold. Individual traditionality (IT)—the extent to which individuals endorse hierarchical authority, obedience, and norm conformity—can attenuate or amplify the strain associated with despotic leadership. Employees high in traditionality are more inclined to interpret authoritarian behavior as legitimate and expected, potentially experiencing less psychological distress in response to the same despotic practices, whereas those low in traditionality may perceive a sharper violation of autonomy and fairness [19–21]. Empirical work shows that power distance orientation and related value orientations moderate the impact of destructive leadership, suggesting that personal value systems act as psychological filters that shape stress appraisals and behavioral reactions [37,38]. Here, then, IT enters the model as a person-level boundary condition: the more readily an employee accepts hierarchical authority, the weaker the DL–PD link should be.

Islamic work ethics (IWE) introduces an additional, explicitly moral lens to the model. Grounded in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, IWE places honesty, patience, diligence, and personal accountability at the center of working life; for employees who hold these values, they operate less as abstract ideals than as a practical compass and a reserve of coping resources when circumstances turn adverse. Several studies suggest that IWE can buffer the negative effects of despotic leadership, notably on psychological distress and deviant behavior, because employees guided by strong ethical principles are more inclined to respond with restraint, perseverance, and constructive coping than with reactive misconduct [16,17,39]. The evidence is not uniform, however, and the competing possibility that strong ethics sharpen the sense of misfit with an unethical leader [18] is taken up in Section 2.2.11. Read through the SSO lens, IWE is a personal resource that slows the conversion of stressor into strain, while from a social exchange perspective it represents an internalized moral obligation that discourages retaliatory behavior even when the leader behaves unjustly.

IWE is therefore modeled as a second moderator, expected to dampen the DL–PD association among employees who have deeply internalized Islamic ethical values. Leadership behavior theories add a final, sobering point: destructive leadership is less a matter of personal friction than a recurring pattern that stalls careers, dampens innovation, and chips away at organizational sustainability. Research shows that exploitative and despotic leadership erode employees' capacity and willingness to contribute to long-term organizational goals, thereby compromising both performance and resilience [37,38]. By weaving together SSO, social exchange theory, individual difference perspectives, and Islamic work ethics, the present study constructs a multi-layered "logical engine" that explains how and why despotic leadership in Saudi travel agencies and international hotels generates psychological distress and, through sequential pathways, culminates in work withdrawal and CWBs, while also clarifying when these harmful processes are likely to be attenuated by traditional value orientations and ethical resources.

2.2. Hypothesis Development

2.2.1. Despotic Leadership and Work Withdrawal

Despotic leaders govern through domination: they hoard decisions, demand unquestioning compliance, and treat subordinates as instruments of their own advancement. The climate this produces is hostile, and employees rarely confront it head-on. More often they step back. Work withdrawal captures that retreat—the late arrivals, unexplained absences, diminished effort, and quiet detachment from organizational life through which people put physical or psychological distance between themselves and a job that has become aversive. The empirical record linking despotic leadership to such retreat is fairly consistent. Kazmi et al. [7] found that despotic leadership significantly increases employee work withdrawal behavior and acquiescent silence, indicating that employees tend to disengage when subjected to oppressive leadership practices. Similarly, Hassan et al. [40] demonstrated a positive relationship between despotic leadership and work withdrawal behavior, suggesting that employees react to authoritarian treatment by reducing their involvement in work-related activities. Further support was provided by Nauman et al. [6], who reported that despotic leadership jeopardizes employee performance through diminished quality of work life and increased work withdrawal. Their findings suggest that employees seek to protect themselves from stressful and unfair treatment by psychologically and behaviorally distancing themselves from the workplace. Likewise, Sarpong et al. [9] revealed that despotic leadership negatively affects employee well-being, creating conditions that encourage withdrawal responses as coping mechanisms. Other work has begun to expose the psychological processes behind this retreat. Iqbal et al. [11] found that despotic leadership contributes to adverse employee behavioral outcomes through psychological distress. Similarly, [13] showed that despotic leadership increases depression and quiet quitting, a modern form of withdrawal characterized by reduced discretionary effort. Moreover, Abid et al. [8] reported that despotic leadership decreases job satisfaction while promoting workplace deviance, both of which are closely associated with employee withdrawal tendencies. Read together, these studies portray despotic supervision as a steady drain on well-being, satisfaction, and engagement, one that makes stepping back an increasingly attractive option. We therefore expect:

H1. *Despotic leadership is positively related to employees' work withdrawal.*

2.2.2. Despotic Leadership and Counterproductive Work Behaviors

Where withdrawal is a retreat, counterproductive work behavior is a push back. CWBs are volitional acts that damage the organization, its resources, or the people in it—incivility

and arguments with colleagues, misuse of organizational resources, time theft, sabotage, and similar rule-breaking. Manipulative, self-serving leaders who show little regard for their subordinates' welfare supply fertile ground for such acts, and the evidence connecting despotic leadership to deviance of this kind has grown steadily. Akhtar et al. [15] found that despotic leadership significantly increases workplace deviance, a sign that oppressive, unfair treatment leaves employees readier to break the rules of the workplace. Their findings further suggest that reduced job satisfaction serves as a mechanism through which despotic leaders foster deviant conduct among employees. This pattern is not confined to explicit forms of deviance; recent evidence from the hospitality sector suggests that perceptions of destructive leadership can trigger a spectrum of counterproductive responses, ranging from passive disengagement to active misconduct [41]. The psychological mechanisms underpinning these reactions, particularly the erosion of self-regulatory resources, appear to operate similarly across different manifestations of harmful workplace behavior. Similarly, Raza et al. [14] traced the incivility provoked by despotic leaders to heightened stress and emotional exhaustion. As employees experience psychological strain under authoritarian leaders, they become more prone to displaying harmful interpersonal behaviors that negatively affect workplace relationships and organizational functioning. This is hardly surprising, since the wider CWB literature has long treated stress and depleted emotional reserves as precursors of misconduct. A smaller but telling body of work brings Islamic work ethics into the picture: Islam et al. argued that despotic leadership undermines positive employee attitudes and behaviors, particularly when ethical values are weakened [42]. Likewise, Zia et al. reported that despotic leadership negatively affects employee adaptability and performance, while Islamic work ethics can buffer some of these adverse outcomes [16]. Raja et al. [18] similarly found that despotic leadership is associated with lower job performance, reduced job satisfaction, and poorer psychological well-being. Damage of this sort rarely stays private; it makes retaliation, or deviance adopted as a crude form of coping, more likely. The cumulative picture is of a supervisory style that renders work stressful, unjust, and psychologically corrosive, and that invites conduct at odds with organizational goals and collegial harmony. Hence:

H2. *Despotic leadership is positively related to counterproductive work behaviors.*

2.2.3. Despotic Leadership and Psychological Distress

Of all the costs that destructive supervisors impose, psychological distress is perhaps the most immediate and the least visible. It is a composite condition—anxiety, tension, low mood, and a sense of hopelessness—that seeps into how people feel about their jobs, how they behave, and how well they perform. Despotic leadership has drawn particular scrutiny in this regard because it fuses control with self-interest and exploitation: the despot overrides employees' interests while demanding their compliance, and the resulting climate keeps mental health under constant threat. The mechanisms through which despotic leadership generates psychological distress are multifaceted, encompassing not only direct exposure to abusive treatment but also the anxiety that arises from perceived resource competition and unfair advantage allocation. Abdelghani and Ahmed [43] found that when employees perceived leaders as engaging in resource favoritism, they experienced heightened resource-competition anxiety—a form of psychological distress that subsequently manifested as energy-wasteful behaviors. This finding underscores how leader behaviors that signal unfairness or exploitation can trigger anxiety states that deplete employees' psychological resources, consistent with the Stressor–Strain–Outcome framework. Direct evidence on the link between despotic leadership and distress is also accumulating. Chaudhary and Islam [12] found that despotic leadership significantly

increases psychological distress among employees, particularly through workplace bullying behaviors and hostile attribution bias. In their account, repeated exposure to unfairness and interpersonal hostility is what leaves the subordinates of despotic leaders emotionally strained. Iqbal et al. [11] demonstrated that despotic leadership directly contributes to employee psychological distress, which subsequently influences various negative behavioral outcomes. Oppressive supervision, they argued, drains psychological resources faster than employees can replenish them. In a similar vein, Rizvi [44] reported that despotic leadership negatively affects the psychological well-being of university faculty members, indicating that employees exposed to authoritarian leadership are more vulnerable to psychological discomfort and emotional instability. Further evidence is provided by Mehmood et al. [45], who found that despotic leadership undermines psychological safety, an essential condition for maintaining positive mental health in the workplace. When employees perceive a lack of safety and support, feelings of stress and psychological strain are likely to increase. Likewise, Al-Kashab et al. [10] demonstrated that despotic leadership contributes to harmful organizational outcomes through psychological contract breach, which often generates frustration, disappointment, and emotional distress among employees. Research examining positive leadership approaches further strengthens this argument. Abdulrab et al., Azmy et al. and Amankwaa et al. [46–48] found that supportive leadership styles promote psychological empowerment, engagement, and innovative behavior. In contrast, despotic leadership deprives employees of these positive psychological resources, increasing the likelihood of experiencing distress and emotional exhaustion. The weight of evidence thus points in one direction: intimidation, insecurity, and bullying, combined with dwindling personal resources, leave the employees of despotic leaders more distressed. Accordingly:

H3. *Despotic leadership is positively related to psychological distress.*

2.2.4. Psychological Distress and Work Withdrawal

Distress is uncomfortable, and people act to reduce discomfort. When anxiety, frustration, and fatigue persist, employees look for ways to shield whatever emotional capacity they have left, and one of the simplest is to invest less of themselves in work. That investment can be withheld physically, through absence and lateness, or psychologically, through presenteeism, token effort, and a growing readiness to leave. It is no accident, then, that distress surfaces again and again as an antecedent of withdrawal. Peng and Li [49] found that emotional exhaustion resulting from emotional labor significantly increases withdrawal behavior among employees. Disengagement, in their reading, is a form of self-protection for employees who are emotionally overstretched. Similarly, Baquero et al. [50] reported that workplace stressors contribute to employees' intention to quit through increased psychological distress, highlighting the central role of psychological strain in withdrawal-related outcomes. Further evidence is provided by Yasami et al. [51], who demonstrated that job insecurity leads to psychological withdrawal behavior by undermining employees' psychological resources and work engagement. Likewise, [52] emphasized that deteriorating employee well-being is closely associated with workplace withdrawal behaviors, suggesting that psychological difficulties often translate into reduced organizational involvement. Abdulaziz et al. [53] also found that psychological detachment mediates the relationship between work overload and workplace withdrawal, indicating that employees experiencing mental strain tend to distance themselves from work demands. Similarly, Najeeb et al. [54] reported that work pressure contributes to withdrawal behaviors, particularly when organizational support is insufficient to buffer employees' psychological burdens. From a broader perspective, Wang et al. [55] highlighted that post-pandemic workplace challenges have intensified employee stress and disengagement, increasing the likelihood of withdrawal

behaviors. Consistent with Job Demands–Resources theory, Bakker and de Vries [56] argued that excessive job demands deplete employees' psychological resources, resulting in burnout and withdrawal tendencies. Moreover, Chaudhary and Islam [12] demonstrated that psychological distress emerges as a direct consequence of adverse workplace experiences, further supporting its role as a precursor to negative employee behaviors. The common thread is that withdrawal serves distressed employees as a coping device, a way of lightening an emotional load that has become too heavy to carry at full engagement. Thus:

H4. *Psychological distress is positively related to work withdrawal.*

2.2.5. Psychological Distress and Counterproductive Work Behaviors

Distress does not always turn inward. Conservation of resources theory [57] explains why: people who sense that their emotional reserves are under threat, or already running low, act to guard whatever remains, and some of those protective acts sit uneasily with, or run directly against, the organization's interests. A distressed employee, weighed down by anxiety, frustration, and exhaustion, also has less self-regulatory capacity with which to hold such impulses in check. Consequently, psychological distress has been increasingly linked to counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), which include workplace deviance, interpersonal conflict, retaliation, misuse of resources, and other actions that undermine organizational effectiveness. Empirical research provides substantial support for this relationship. Striler et al. [58] found that workplace stressors significantly contribute to counterproductive work behaviors, suggesting that employees experiencing heightened psychological strain are more likely to engage in harmful workplace actions. Similarly, [59] demonstrated that emotional exhaustion resulting from workplace ostracism negatively affects employee productivity, indicating that psychological distress can trigger dysfunctional behavioral responses in the workplace. Further evidence is provided by Ilyas et al. [60], who reported that workplace ostracism impairs employee performance through adverse emotional experiences, while emotional intelligence helps mitigate these effects. Likewise, Noor et al. [61] found that workplace ostracism depletes employees' psychological resources and reduces psychological safety, conditions that increase the likelihood of negative and counterproductive behaviors. These findings suggest that employees experiencing emotional strain and social exclusion may respond through behaviors detrimental to organizational functioning. Research examining psychological resources also supports this argument. Naveed et al. [62] demonstrated that adequate job resources and psychological contract fulfillment enhance employee engagement and adaptive performance, implying that the absence of such resources may contribute to psychological distress and subsequent counterproductive behaviors. Similarly, Khan et al. [63] found that despotic leadership produces adverse employee outcomes through heightened emotional and psychological strain. Supporting this perspective, Akdoğan et al. [64] reported that despotic leadership increases emotional exhaustion and revanchist behaviors among nurses, highlighting the connection between psychological distress and harmful workplace conduct. Likewise, Albashiti et al. [4] found that despotic leadership adversely affects employee work-related outcomes by creating emotionally draining work environments. What emerges is a picture of distress loosening emotional stability and self-control, so that harmful conduct becomes a more available response—sometimes as coping, sometimes as reprisal—to adverse experiences at work. We propose:

H5. *Psychological distress is positively related to counterproductive work behaviors.*

2.2.6. Work Withdrawal and Counterproductive Work Behaviors

Withdrawal and CWBs are kindred reactions to an unsatisfying workplace, yet they differ in intent and reach. The first is largely self-protective: an employee pulls back effort, time, or attention. The second is outwardly harmful: it targets the organization or its members through deviance, conflict, sabotage, or deliberate rule violation. A recurring argument in the literature is that the two are sequentially linked, with withdrawal marking an early phase of detachment that can, if left unaddressed, harden into more damaging conduct. Several studies lend this argument empirical weight. Zhang et al. [65] found that employees who perceive themselves as overqualified are more likely to engage in both withdrawal behaviors and counterproductive work behaviors. Their findings suggest that withdrawal and counterproductive actions emerge simultaneously as reactions to negative workplace perceptions and dissatisfaction. Similarly, Szostek et al. [66] demonstrated that lower job satisfaction and work engagement contribute significantly to counterproductive work behaviors, indicating that employees who psychologically disengage from their work are more likely to exhibit behaviors detrimental to organizational effectiveness. The literature on destructive leadership also provides indirect evidence for this relationship. Nauman et al. [6] found that despotic leadership reduces employees' quality of work life and increases work withdrawal, resulting in diminished employee performance. Such withdrawal tendencies often reflect a broader process of disengagement that may facilitate the emergence of counterproductive behaviors. Likewise, Jabeen et al. [67] reported that despotic leadership decreases employee engagement and trust while undermining task performance, suggesting that withdrawal from organizational involvement can contribute to harmful behavioral outcomes. Similarly, [42] found that despotic leadership negatively influences employee attitudes and behaviors, particularly when ethical values are weakened. Hamid [68] further demonstrated that despotic leadership diminishes employee happiness at work, increasing the likelihood of disengagement and negative workplace conduct. Supporting these findings, Khizar et al. [69], in their systematic review of despotic leadership research, concluded that despotic leadership consistently contributes to adverse employee attitudes and behaviors, including withdrawal, reduced commitment, and workplace deviance.

Why should withdrawal come before CWBs rather than merely accompany them? The SSO framework is silent on the order in which strain surfaces in behavior, so the ordering has to be argued on other grounds, and three arguments point in the same direction. The first comes from conservation of resources theory, which holds that people under threat begin by protecting what remains of their resources [57]. Withdrawal is the cheapest protection available: it requires no confrontation and carries little risk of sanction. The second comes from research on the progression of withdrawal, which suggests that employees who remain dissatisfied move from milder toward more consequential responses when the milder ones fail to restore balance [70]. Under a leader who stays despotic, pulling back seldom relieves the strain for long. The third is that withdrawal loosens the bonds that ordinarily restrain deviance. Detachment, in other words, lowers the psychological cost of misbehaving: once an employee has mentally or physically checked out, norm-violating acts that erode workplace effectiveness become easier to contemplate. Such an employee has less invested in the leader's approval, in colleagues' regard, or in the job itself, and the emotion-centered model of voluntary work behavior places CWBs precisely where negative emotion meets weakened restraint [33]. The reverse sequence is conceivable—employees who misbehave may also withdraw to avoid scrutiny—and cross-sectional data cannot settle the matter; the ordering proposed here rests on theory and is tested as a structural rather than a temporal relation. We therefore hypothesize:

H6. *Work withdrawal is positively related to counterproductive work behaviors.*

2.2.7. The Intervening Role of Psychological Distress in the Despotic Leadership–Work Withdrawal Link

Hypotheses 1, 3, and 4 together imply a chain, and the SSO framework makes that chain explicit. A leader who manipulates, bends power to private ends, and treats subordinates as expendable is a stressor; the strain such a leader induces is psychological distress; and withdrawal is one of the behavioral forms that strain takes. Put differently, distress should carry at least part of the effect of despotic leadership onto withdrawal. Evidence for each link in this chain is already available. Thakur and Srivastava [13] found that despotic leadership significantly increases employee depression and encourages quiet quitting, suggesting that psychological suffering serves as a precursor to withdrawal-related behaviors. Similarly, Badar et al. [71] demonstrated that despotic leadership contributes to emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions, indicating that employees exposed to authoritarian leadership are more likely to experience psychological strain that fosters disengagement from work. Likewise, Akdoğan et al. [64] reported that despotic leadership increases emotional exhaustion among nurses, leading to adverse workplace outcomes. Emotional exhaustion represents a critical component of psychological distress and reflects the depletion of employees' emotional resources. Supporting these findings, Albashiti et al. [4] found that despotic leadership negatively affects employees' work-related outcomes in the hospitality sector by creating emotionally draining and stressful work environments. Similarly, Rafiq et al. [72] revealed that emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and disruption in employees' family lives, further demonstrating the psychological burden associated with despotic leadership. Additional evidence for the mediating mechanism is provided by Iqbal et al. [11], who directly examined psychological distress as a mediator and found that despotic leadership influences employee behavioral outcomes through increased psychological distress. On their evidence, the emotional suffering that despotic supervision inflicts is what subsequently shapes employees' negative conduct. Furthermore, Ghadi [37] demonstrated that psychological processes play a significant mediating role in explaining the adverse consequences of despotic leadership on employee outcomes, reinforcing the importance of psychological mechanisms in the leadership–behavior relationship. The sequence, then, runs from exposure to a despotic leader, through stress, exhaustion, and low mood, to a retreat from work that employees adopt to cope with conditions they cannot otherwise change. Hence:

H7. *Despotic leadership is indirectly related to work withdrawal through psychological distress.*

2.2.8. The Intervening Role of Psychological Distress in the Despotic Leadership–Counterproductive Work Behavior Link

The same SSO logic extends to the more destructive outcome. If despotic supervision is the stressor and distress its strain, then some share of the CWBs observed under despotic leaders should be traceable to the distress those leaders' cause. The argument is not new, but the evidence behind it has thickened considerably. Iqbal et al. [11] found that psychological distress significantly mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and employee behavioral outcomes, suggesting that employees exposed to despotic leadership experience emotional suffering that translates into adverse workplace conduct. Their study is among the few to model distress itself, rather than a proxy, as the conduit between leadership and conduct. Hospitality research on neighboring leadership dynamics tells a comparable story. Ref. [73], for instance, demonstrated that perceived leader favoritism influenced non-green employee behaviors through the mediating mechanism of malicious envy, while

organizational injustice amplified these indirect effects. This pattern of mediation—in which negative leadership perceptions elicit psychological responses that subsequently shape behavior—aligns closely with the theoretical logic underpinning the present study's mediation hypotheses. Similarly, Murad et al. [22] reported that emotional exhaustion and organizational cynicism mediate the relationship between despotic leadership and counterproductive work behavior among police personnel. Since emotional exhaustion represents a core dimension of psychological distress, the findings indicate that psychological strain serves as an important pathway through which despotic leadership encourages harmful employee behaviors. In a related vein, Mehmood et al. [25] showed that despotic leadership, together with workplace incivility, suppresses employees' innovative behavior, which again points to psychological mechanisms at work. Further evidence is provided by Usman et al. [36], who demonstrated that despotic leadership promotes knowledge sabotage behavior through psychological and attitudinal processes. Likewise, Mahmood et al. [74] found that despotic leadership significantly increases counterproductive work behavior, particularly when followers possess characteristics that heighten their susceptibility to negative workplace experiences. Employees who answer to authoritarian, abusive leaders, it seems, are quicker to reach for norm-violating responses. Moreover, Ali et al. [24] revealed that workload stress mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and workplace incivility, reinforcing the argument that psychological strain links leadership behavior to harmful workplace actions. Similarly, Stawnychko et al. [75] emphasized that toxic leadership environments foster organizational incivility and dysfunctional behaviors by creating conditions of psychological stress and emotional insecurity. In sum, despotic supervision appears to raise distress through accumulated stress, exhaustion, and toxic encounters, and distressed employees are, in turn, more prone to respond to these conditions with counterproductive acts. Accordingly:

H8. *Despotic leadership is indirectly related to counterproductive work behaviors through psychological distress.*

2.2.9. The Sequential Pathway: From Distress Through Withdrawal to Counterproductive Work Behaviors

Taken together, Hypotheses 3, 4, and 6 imply a further and more demanding claim. If despotic leadership is associated with distress, distress with withdrawal, and withdrawal in turn lowers the barriers to deviance, then part of the association between despotic leadership and CWBs should travel along a three-link route: the despotic leader as stressor, distress as strain, withdrawal as the first defensive response, and CWBs as the more active outcome that follows when withdrawal fails to restore balance. Plain SSO logic predicts only that strain will surface in behavior. The ordering rests on the resource-conservation, progression, and restraint arguments set out for H6. Earlier work has come close to this proposition without testing it. Murad et al. [22] showed that emotional exhaustion and organizational cynicism carry the effect of despotic leadership to CWBs among police personnel, and Nauman et al. [6] identified withdrawal as a conduit between despotic leadership and performance; to our knowledge, no study has placed distress and withdrawal in sequence on the path to CWBs. Estimating this serial path is the core mediation contribution of the present study. We therefore expect:

H9. *Psychological distress and work withdrawal sequentially mediate the relationship between despotic leadership and counterproductive work behaviors.*

2.2.10. When Hierarchy Feels Legitimate: The Buffering Role of Individual Traditionality

The same despotic behavior does not land with equal force on every subordinate. How much it hurts depends partly on what the employee believes a leader is entitled to do. Individual traditionality captures one such belief system: a commitment to deference, obedience, conformity, and the propriety of hierarchical relations. For a highly traditional employee, an overbearing superior may be unpleasant but not illegitimate—closer to the expected order of things than to a violation of it—and the strain that follows should be correspondingly muted. Although the construct was first theorized in Chinese societies [76], its core—deference to the head of the organizational 'household' and to senior authority—resonates with the family-centered, hierarchical authority relations that characterize much of Saudi working life [2]. Research on traditionality and adjacent cultural values generally bears this reasoning out. Ghadi [37] demonstrated that individual characteristics significantly influence the effects of despotic leadership on employee outcomes, highlighting the importance of personal value systems in shaping employees' responses to destructive leadership. Similarly, Shahzad et al. [19] found that individual-level power distance orientation moderates the impact of despotic leadership on employee outcomes. Employees with higher acceptance of hierarchical authority experienced weaker negative consequences of despotic leadership than those with lower power distance orientation. Further evidence is provided by Hu et al. [20], who reported that traditionality reduces the adverse effects of negative mentoring experiences by influencing individuals' interpretations of authority-based interactions. Employees with stronger traditional values were less likely to experience resource depletion when confronted with unfavorable treatment from senior organizational members. Traditionality, on this evidence, cushions employees against stressors that originate higher up the hierarchy. Likewise, Akram et al. [77] found that leadership exploitation contributes to employee distress and dysfunctional workplace behaviors, but employees differ in the intensity of these reactions depending on personal and contextual factors. Supporting this argument, Cao et al. [78], through a meta-analysis, demonstrated that leadership-related aggression and destructive leadership behaviors do not affect all employees equally, emphasizing the role of individual differences in shaping psychological responses. Similarly, Kong et al. [38] found that personal value orientations can moderate the effects of exploitative leadership on employee outcomes, while Sheng et al. [21] reported that individual characteristics significantly influence how employees respond to despotic leadership in workplace settings. The implication is that employees who hold traditional values firmly will tend to read authoritarian conduct as part of a legitimate order and, for that reason, will suffer less distress in its presence. We therefore propose:

H10. *Individual traditionality buffers the positive association between despotic leadership and psychological distress, so that the association is weaker among more traditional employees.*

2.2.11. Islamic Work Ethics as a Moderator of the Despotic Leadership–Psychological Distress Relationship

Islamic work ethics frame work itself as a moral undertaking. Justice, patience (sabr), honesty, cooperation, diligence, and perseverance are presented not merely as sound professional habits but as religious obligations, and the believer who holds them is encouraged to meet hardship with self-discipline rather than resentment. Understood as a personal resource, IWE should therefore help employees absorb adverse organizational conditions with less psychological damage, including the conditions that a despotic superior creates. Evidence from several quarters is consistent with this protective role. Zafar et al. [17], in their systematic review of Islamic work ethics literature, concluded that Islamic ethical

values contribute positively to employee well-being, resilience, job satisfaction, and psychological adjustment. The authors emphasized that Islamic work ethics provide individuals with a strong moral framework that enhances their ability to manage workplace stress and adversity. The direct evidence on how IWE interacts with despotic leadership is, however, not one-sided, and it needs to be read carefully. Raja et al. [18], studying employees in Pakistan, found that the negative associations of despotic leadership with job performance, job satisfaction, and psychological well-being were stronger, not weaker, among employees high in IWE. Their explanation is one of misfit: employees with firm ethical convictions experience a self-serving, unethical leader as an affront to their values, and the incongruence compounds the harm. Zia et al. [16], by contrast, found in a three-wave study of construction managers that IWE weakened the association between despotic leadership and psychological distress. The two findings need not be irreconcilable. Value incongruence is most likely to bite when the outcome is a judgment about the job or the leader, whereas the emphasis of IWE on patience (sabr), self-discipline, and trust in a justice that lies beyond the immediate workplace offers a way of regulating the emotional response itself. The second mechanism bears more directly on distress, the outcome examined here. It should also carry particular weight in Saudi Arabia, where strong commitment to the Islamic work ethic has long been documented among managers [79] and is socially shared rather than held by a minority, so that firm ethical convictions are less likely to set an employee apart. We therefore expect a buffering effect on distress, while treating the value-incongruence pattern as a credible alternative against which the hypothesis is tested. Consistent with the buffering view, Raza et al. [39] reported that IWE conditions the path from despotic leadership, via emotional exhaustion, to employee-instigated incivility. The authors suggest that employees who strongly adhere to Islamic ethical principles are less likely to react negatively to emotionally exhausting workplace experiences. Likewise, Sutowo et al. [80] found that Islamic leadership and Islamic work ethics enhance employee performance and positive work attitudes, suggesting that these ethical values foster psychological strength and constructive coping mechanisms. Furthermore, Khizer et al. [35] demonstrated that contextual and personal resources can weaken the adverse effects of despotic and autocratic leadership on employee deviant behavior. IWE is precisely such a personal resource, and there is good reason to expect it to blunt the psychological sting of despotic supervision. Overall, the evidence on distress-related outcomes suggests that Islamic work ethics provide employees with moral guidance, resilience, and psychological resources that help them cope with authoritarian leadership behaviors. Employees who hold these values strongly should, as a consequence, feel less distressed when working under a despotic leader. Hence:

H11. *Islamic work ethics buffer the positive association between despotic leadership and psychological distress, so that the association is weaker among employees with stronger IWE.*

2.3. Conceptual Model

Building on the Stressor–Strain–Outcome (SSO) framework and social exchange theory, this study proposes a sequential mediation model to examine how despotic leadership influences employees' behavioral outcomes. Despotic leadership, characterized by authoritarian control and self-interest [26], is hypothesized to increase psychological distress [4], which in turn promotes work withdrawal [32] and counterproductive work behaviors [34]. Because withdrawal is also expected to feed CWBs (H6), the model implies a sequential route in which distress precedes withdrawal and withdrawal precedes deviance (H9). Additionally, individual traditionality [81] and Islamic work ethics [82] are hypothesized to moderate the relationship between despotic leadership and psychological distress, such that these personal resources weaken the adverse effects of despotic leadership. Figure 1 brings

these direct, indirect, and conditional paths together in a single model of how despotic supervision wears down employee well-being and, with it, the functioning of the workplace.

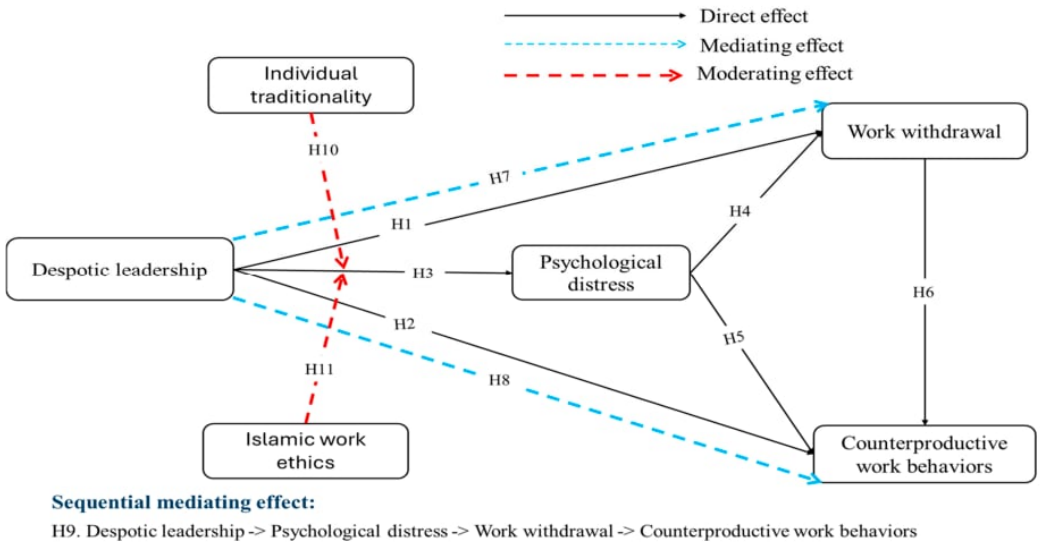


Figure 1. Proposed research model.

2.4. Linking the Model to Sustainability and the SDGs

The costs of despotic leadership do not stop at the office door. They bear on whether organizations can sustain themselves and on whether they advance, or hold back, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) concerned with health, decent work, and effective institutions. SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) are directly affected by leadership practices that influence employee psychological health and workplace conditions. Nor are the consequences confined to individual employees; they reach organizational effectiveness and, eventually, competitive standing. Abdelghani et al. [83] demonstrated that employee-related organizational capabilities are critical drivers of sustainable marketing performance in tourism SMEs, suggesting that leadership practices that undermine employee well-being and engagement may have lasting consequences for organizational sustainability. Similarly, Ahmed et al. [84] found that employee engagement serves as a mediating mechanism linking organizational initiatives to sustainable performance outcomes, further reinforcing the importance of protecting employee psychological resources as a foundation for organizational sustainability.

The Saudi setting gives these connections particular relevance. Under Vision 2030, tourism has been positioned as a pillar of economic diversification [1], and survey evidence from hotels and travel agencies shows that the sector's sustainability transition is driven chiefly by policy direction, market incentives, and knowledge collaboration [5]. Expert accounts of the same transition note that firms have so far concentrated on operational measures—energy, water, and waste—while leadership commitment, organizational culture, and the skills of staff and managers emerge both as conditions for lasting change and as recurrent barriers to it [3]. The well-being of employees under supervision belongs to this social and human side of the agenda. A sector that must attract and retain a growing national workforce has good reason to regard the psychological costs of despotic leadership as more than a private matter between supervisor and subordinate.

Research shows that despotic leadership undermines employee well-being by increasing psychological distress, emotional exhaustion, and depression [11,13]. Such conditions sit squarely at odds with the aspiration of safe, healthy workplaces that can endure. In a similar vein, Raza et al. [14] demonstrate that despotic leadership increases stress and

emotional exhaustion, which negatively affects employee behavior and overall workplace sustainability. Such outcomes reduce productivity, increase turnover intentions, and weaken organizational stability. From a sustainability perspective, organizations cannot achieve long-term success if leadership practices generate withdrawal behaviors, deviance, and reduced engagement. Studies indicate that despotic leadership contributes to counterproductive work behaviors and workplace incivility, which harm organizational performance and innovation [22,25]. These negative outcomes weaken institutional effectiveness and directly conflict with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), which emphasizes the importance of building accountable and inclusive organizations.

However, research also highlights mitigating factors that support sustainable work environments. Islamic work ethics and individual values such as traditionality may buffer some of the negative effects of despotic leadership, promoting resilience, ethical behavior, and psychological stability [16,17]. These ethical frameworks contribute to sustainable organizational cultures by reducing psychological distress and encouraging responsible employee behavior [16]. Knowing how, and for whom, despotic leadership does its damage is therefore a precondition for designing leadership practices that protect employees, strengthen organizational resilience, and serve wider sustainability commitments. We emphasize that these sustainability and national-policy connections provide the contextual motivation for the study; organizational sustainability, SDG performance, and Vision 2030 outcomes were not measured in it.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Measures

The survey instrument had two parts: a short demographic section, followed by multi-item measures of the six focal constructs, all taken from established scales. Despotic leadership (DL) was captured with the six-item scale of De Hoogh and Den Hartog [26]; psychological distress (PD) with six items adapted from Albashiti et al. [4]; and work withdrawal (WW) with six items drawn from Hanisch and Hulin [32]. Counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) were assessed with five items adapted from a hospitality-specific instrument [34]; individual traditionality (IT) with five items used by Sun et al. [81]; and Islamic work ethics (IWE) with a four-item short form [82]. The questionnaire was rendered into Arabic and then independently back-translated into English [85]. A panel of five academics and eight mid-level hotel employees then examined the Arabic version for clarity, content validity, and fit with the Saudi service context, and judged the items intelligible and relevant. Every item was answered on a five-point Likert-type scale. Higher scores denote higher levels of the focal construct, and the full wording of every item is provided in Supplementary Table S1.

3.2. Participants and Procedure

The target population comprised people employed by travel agencies and international hotels operating in Saudi Arabia. Recruitment took place through professional online communities: the research team identified sector-specific groups on WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and LinkedIn and sent the link to the electronic questionnaire, by private message, to members working in the two sub-sectors. To verify eligibility, the questionnaire opened with a screening question asking respondents to confirm that they were currently employed in a hotel or travel agency in Saudi Arabia; only those who answered affirmatively could proceed. To prevent duplicate submissions, the one-response-per-respondent setting was activated in the survey platform. All participants were Saudi nationals. The opening page made clear that no names or other identifying details would be requested. Ethical clearance was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Tourism

and Hotels, Suez Canal University (Ref. No. 1-2-8-2026; approved 13 March 2026), and the research adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and to prevailing regulations governing work with human participants.

An information statement preceded the items. It explained that the survey served academic purposes only; that answers were anonymous and confidential, with demographic details the only personal information recorded; that data would be stored securely, analyzed only in aggregate, and used solely for this project; and that taking part was voluntary and carried no foreseeable risk. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data were collected between 15 March and 31 May 2026, yielding 441 complete and usable questionnaires. The employing organizations were identified from respondents' self-reported workplace information in the questionnaire, which showed that they worked in seven hotels and eight travel agencies. Hotel and travel-agency employees were analyzed as a single sample of tourism and hospitality service employees; possible sub-sector differences are acknowledged in Section 7. A sample of this size exceeds the minimum ratios of observations to estimated parameters commonly recommended for PLS-SEM and offers adequate statistical power for the structural paths tested here.

Men made up 61.7% of the sample (n = 272) and women 38.3% (n = 169). The workforce was relatively young: 55.8% (n = 246) were aged 25–35 and 35.1% (n = 155) were aged 36–50, with small minorities under 25 (7.0%, n = 31) or over 50 (2.0%, n = 9). Two-thirds held a bachelor's degree (66.0%, n = 291); 17.7% (n = 78) had postgraduate qualifications, 10.4% (n = 46) reported other educational backgrounds, and 5.9% (n = 26) had completed high school.

3.3. Data Analysis

Because all constructs were self-reported by the same respondents on a single occasion, common method bias (CMB) was examined before hypothesis testing. Harman's single-factor test [86] showed that a single factor accounted for 31.893% of the total variance, below the conventional 50% cutoff. As this test has limited sensitivity, a full-collinearity assessment was also conducted following Kock [87], in which all latent constructs were regressed on a common criterion variable. All full-collinearity VIFs were below the 3.3 threshold (maximum = 1.839), suggesting that CMB is unlikely to be a serious concern. Indicator-level VIFs ranged from 1.613 to 2.962 (Table 1), below the threshold of 5.0 [88]; these values address collinearity among measurement items and are not themselves a CMB diagnostic. Nevertheless, because all data were collected from a single source at one point in time, common-source variance cannot be entirely excluded. Skewness values ranged from −1.250 to −0.230 and kurtosis values from −1.206 to 1.263 (Table 1), indicating no severe departure from normality, although PLS-SEM does not require normally distributed data. In the estimated model, despotic leadership (DL) is the exogenous predictor; psychological distress (PD) and work withdrawal (WW) are intervening variables; counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) form the final outcome; and individual traditionality (IT) and Islamic work ethics (IWE) are specified as moderators of the DL–PD path. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis) were computed in SPSS 25, and the measurement and structural models were estimated in SmartPLS, with significance assessed through bootstrapping (5000 subsamples). PLS-SEM was selected because the proposed model is relatively complex, combining a serial mediation chain with two moderators on the same path, and because the study is explanatory in orientation, aiming to maximize the explained variance (R^2) in the endogenous constructs and to advance theory rather than to confirm a covariance structure.

Table 1. Indicator loadings, collinearity, descriptive statistics, and construct reliability and validity.

Dimensions and Variables	λ	[VIF]	[μ]	[σ]	[SK]	[KU]
Despotic leadership (DL) (α = 0.917, CR = 0.935, AVE = 0.706)						
DL_1	0.838	2.917	3.705	0.993	−0.824	0.523
DL_2	0.866	2.830	3.812	0.950	−1.100	1.263
DL_3	0.843	2.858	3.717	0.969	−0.730	0.392
DL_4	0.836	2.369	3.943	1.046	−1.250	1.217
DL_5	0.828	2.916	3.871	1.022	−0.855	0.345
DL_6	0.831	2.924	3.859	1.026	−0.806	0.193
Psychological distress (PD) (α = 0.895, CR = 0.920, AVE = 0.656)						
PD_1	0.773	2.814	3.587	1.017	−0.512	−0.229
PD_2	0.848	2.870	3.728	0.981	−0.594	−0.158
PD_3	0.848	2.773	3.814	1.096	−0.978	0.333
PD_4	0.763	2.798	3.456	1.046	−0.445	−0.294
PD_5	0.822	2.605	3.612	1.043	−0.464	−0.455
PD_6	0.801	2.464	3.667	1.085	−0.637	−0.260
Work withdrawal (WW) (α = 0.905, CR = 0.927, AVE = 0.678)						
WW_1	0.821	2.330	3.605	1.013	−0.863	0.281
WW_2	0.855	2.892	3.460	1.018	−0.640	−0.180
WW_3	0.847	2.962	3.331	1.038	−0.487	−0.339
WW_4	0.846	2.595	3.494	1.016	−0.572	−0.181
WW_5	0.795	2.523	3.717	1.000	−0.972	0.623
WW_6	0.772	2.310	3.721	1.014	−0.758	0.180
Counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) (α = 0.868, CR = 0.905, AVE = 0.655)						
CWB_1	0.777	1.962	3.628	1.111	−0.775	−0.019
CWB_2	0.822	2.188	3.764	1.091	−0.925	0.352
CWB_3	0.854	2.300	3.710	1.010	−1.029	0.843
CWB_4	0.816	1.997	3.658	1.093	−0.738	0.018
CWB_5	0.775	1.758	3.658	1.127	−0.750	−0.114
Individual traditionality (IT) (α = 0.844, CR = 0.887, AVE = 0.611						
IT_1	0.772	2.081	3.646	1.071	−0.496	−0.457
IT_2	0.831	2.114	3.751	1.073	−0.632	−0.160
IT_3	0.786	1.651	3.615	1.023	−0.478	−0.143
IT_4	0.810	1.911	3.580	1.128	−0.469	−0.514
IT_5	0.703	1.652	3.599	1.089	−0.360	−0.641
Islamic work ethics (IWE) (α = 0.871, CR = 0.912, AVE = 0.721)						
IWE_1	0.891	2.543	3.415	1.371	−0.230	−1.206
IWE_2	0.871	2.855	3.594	1.243	−0.277	−1.099
IWE_3	0.850	2.265	3.624	1.228	−0.325	−0.969
IWE_4	0.780	1.613	3.481	1.345	−0.373	−1.006

Note: factor loadings = λ, Cronbach's alpha coefficients = α, composite reliability = CR, average variance extracted = AVE, Skewness = SK, Kurtosis = KU, mean = μ, standard deviation = σ.

4. Results

4.1. Measurement Model Assessment

The outer model performed well (Table 1). Every indicator loaded above 0.70 on its intended construct (0.703–0.891), and internal consistency was high, with Cronbach's alpha between 0.844 and 0.917 and composite reliability (CR) between 0.887 and 0.935 [89]. Average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.611 to 0.721; each construct therefore accounts for more than half of the variance in its indicators, which establishes convergent validity [90].

Two criteria were used to judge discriminant validity. Under the Fornell–Larcker rule [90], a construct is empirically distinct when the square root of its AVE (√AVE) is larger than its correlations with every other construct. Table 2 shows that this condition holds throughout: the diagonal values (0.782–0.849) exceed all off-diagonal correlations, the largest of which is 0.715.

Table 2. Fornell–Larcker criterion matrix.

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Counterproductive work behaviors	0.809					
2.	Despotic leadership	0.516	0.840				
3.	Individual traditionality	0.377	0.455	0.782			
4.	Islamic work ethics	0.093	0.336	0.192	0.849		
5.	Psychological distress	0.609	0.518	0.262	0.109	0.810	
6.	Work withdrawal	0.581	0.493	0.253	0.119	0.715	0.823

The shaded diagonal values represent the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct. The off-diagonal values represent the inter-construct correlations. Discriminant validity is established as all diagonal values exceed their corresponding off-diagonal correlations.

The heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratios in Table 3 point to the same conclusion. Hair et al. [88] recommend that HTMT stay under 0.90, and ideally under the stricter 0.85; the highest ratio observed here was 0.795, between psychological distress and work withdrawal. On both criteria, then, the six constructs are empirically distinguishable, and the measurement model offers a sound basis for testing the structural paths.

Table 3. HTMT Matrix.

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Counterproductive work behaviors						
2.	Despotic leadership	0.575					
3.	Individual traditionality	0.433	0.508				
4.	Islamic work ethics	0.106	0.370	0.215			
5.	Psychological distress	0.684	0.565	0.279	0.120		
6.	Work withdrawal	0.654	0.540	0.275	0.136	0.795	

4.2. Structural Model and Hypothesis Tests

Table 4 reports the structural estimates. All six direct paths were significant and in the expected direction. Despotic leadership was positively related to work withdrawal (H1: $\beta = 0.167$, $t = 3.325$, $p = 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.044$), to counterproductive work behaviors (H2: $\beta = 0.234$, $t = 4.939$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.070$), and to psychological distress (H3: $\beta = 0.377$, $t = 5.548$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.109$). Distress, in turn, showed its strongest association with with-

drawal (H4: β = 0.628, t = 14.318, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.616$)—by some margin the largest effect in the model—and a smaller but clear association with CWBs (H5: β = 0.315, t = 6.016, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.082$). Withdrawal was also positively related to CWBs (H6: β = 0.241, t = 4.078, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.050$). Both indirect effects of despotic leadership through distress were significant, and neither bootstrapped confidence interval includes zero: the indirect effect on withdrawal was 0.237 (H7: t = 5.024, $p < 0.001$, CI [0.139, 0.324]) and that on CWBs was 0.119 (H8: t = 4.368, $p < 0.001$, CI [0.067, 0.167]). Because the direct paths from despotic leadership to both outcomes remained significant, the mediation is partial rather than full.

Table 4. Structural model results.

Hypothesis	β	t	*p*	f^2	Remark
Direct effect					
H1. Despotic leadership → Work withdrawal	0.167	3.325	0.001	0.044	✔
H2. Despotic leadership → Counterproductive work behaviors	0.234	4.939	<0.001	0.070	✔
H3. Despotic leadership → Psychological distress	0.377	5.548	<0.001	0.109	✔
H4. Psychological distress → Work withdrawal	0.628	14.318	<0.001	0.616	✔
H5. Psychological distress → Counterproductive work behaviors	0.315	6.016	<0.001	0.082	✔
H6. Work withdrawal → Counterproductive work behaviors	0.241	4.078	<0.001	0.050	✔
H7. Despotic leadership → Psychological distress → Work withdrawal	0.237	5.024	<0.001	0.139 0.324	✔
H8. Despotic leadership → Psychological distress → Counterproductive work behaviors	0.119	4.368	<0.001	0.067 0.167	✔
Sequential indirect mediating effect					
H9. Despotic leadership →Psychological distress→ Work withdrawal → Counterproductive work behaviors	0.057	3.230	0.001	0.024 0.092	✔
Moderator Main Effect and Interaction Effect					
H10. Despotic leadership × Individual traditionality → Psychological distress	−0.122	2.952	0.003		✔
H11. Despotic leadership × Islamic work ethics→ Psychological distress	−0.137	2.899	0.004		✔
Individual traditionality → Psychological distress	−0.032	0.582	0.561		X
Islamic work ethics → Psychological distress	−0.046	1.346	0.179		X
Counterproductive work behaviors		R^2	0.452	Q^2	0.280
Psychological distress		R^2	0.320	Q^2	0.193
Work withdrawal		R^2	0.531	Q^2	0.340

Note: Despotic leadership = (DL), Psychological distress = (PD), Work withdrawal = (WW), Counterproductive work behaviors = (CWB), Individual traditionality = (IT), Islamic work ethics = (IWE), ✔ = Supported, X = Not supported (non-significant path), Confidence intervals = CI.

Furthermore, as shown in Table 4, the serial indirect effect of despotic leadership on counterproductive work behaviors through psychological distress and work withdrawal in sequence was positive and significant (H9: β = 0.057, t = 3.230, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI [0.024, 0.092]), supporting the sequential mediation hypothesis.

Finally, as depicted in Figure 2, both interaction terms were negative and significant: individual traditionality (H10: β = −0.122, t = 2.952, $p = 0.003$) and Islamic work ethics (H11: β = −0.137, t = 2.899, $p = 0.004$) each weakened the positive association between despotic leadership and distress. Figures 3 and 4 plot the simple slopes of despotic leadership on psychological distress at −1 SD, the mean, and +1 SD of individual traditionality and Islamic work ethics. In both cases the relationship remained positive at all three levels but was progressively weaker as the moderator increased, consistent with a buffering role.

Additionally, as shown in Table 4, the direct effects of individual traditionality and Islamic work ethics on psychological distress were not significant. This indicates that the two moderators function as pure moderators, shaping the strength of the relationship between despotic leadership and psychological distress rather than influencing psychological distress directly. The moderation model was estimated using the two-stage approach in SmartPLS.

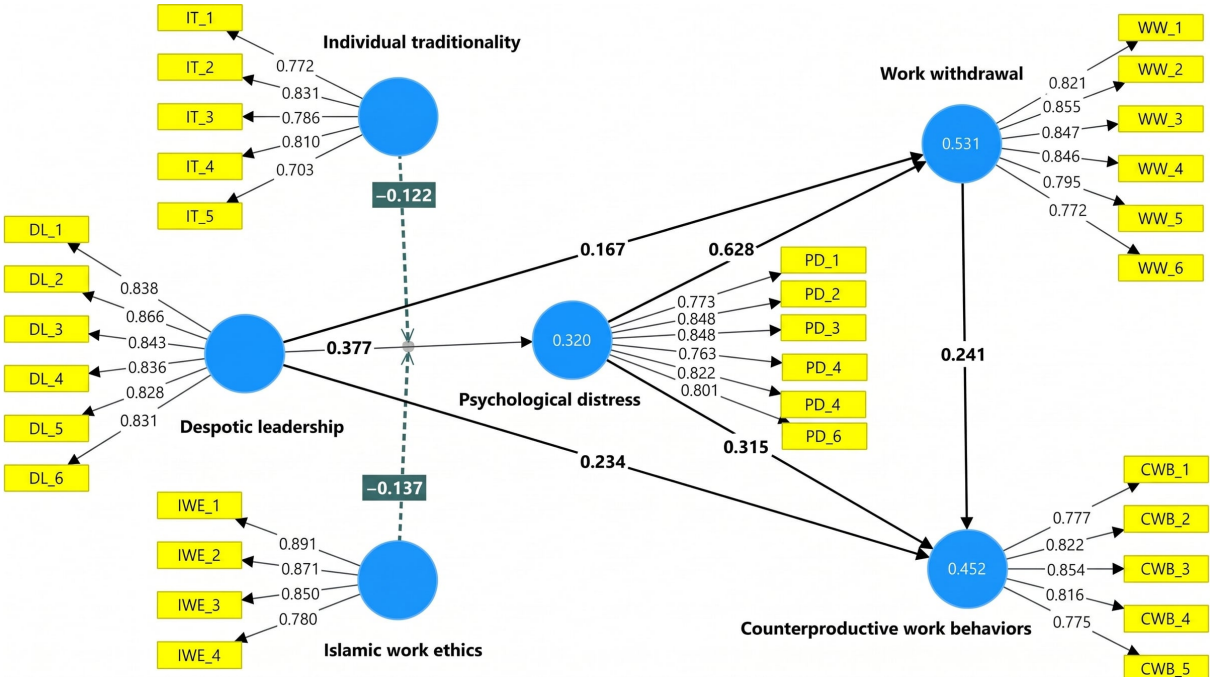


Figure 2. Structural model estimates (path coefficients and R^2 values).

Turning to explanatory and predictive power, the model accounts for 53.1% of the variance in work withdrawal, 45.2% in counterproductive work behaviors, and 32.0% in psychological distress, which are moderate levels by PLS-SEM conventions. Stone–Geisser Q^2 values were positive for every endogenous construct (0.193–0.340), indicating in-sample predictive relevance within the estimated model [88]. These values should not be taken as evidence of out-of-sample predictive performance. As supplementary indicators of approximate fit, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) was 0.062, under the customary 0.08 cut-off [91]. The normed fit index (NFI) was 0.815, inside the 0.60–0.90 band regarded as acceptable in earlier work [92,93]. Both indices are best read as heuristics in PLS-SEM rather than as definitive tests of model correctness.

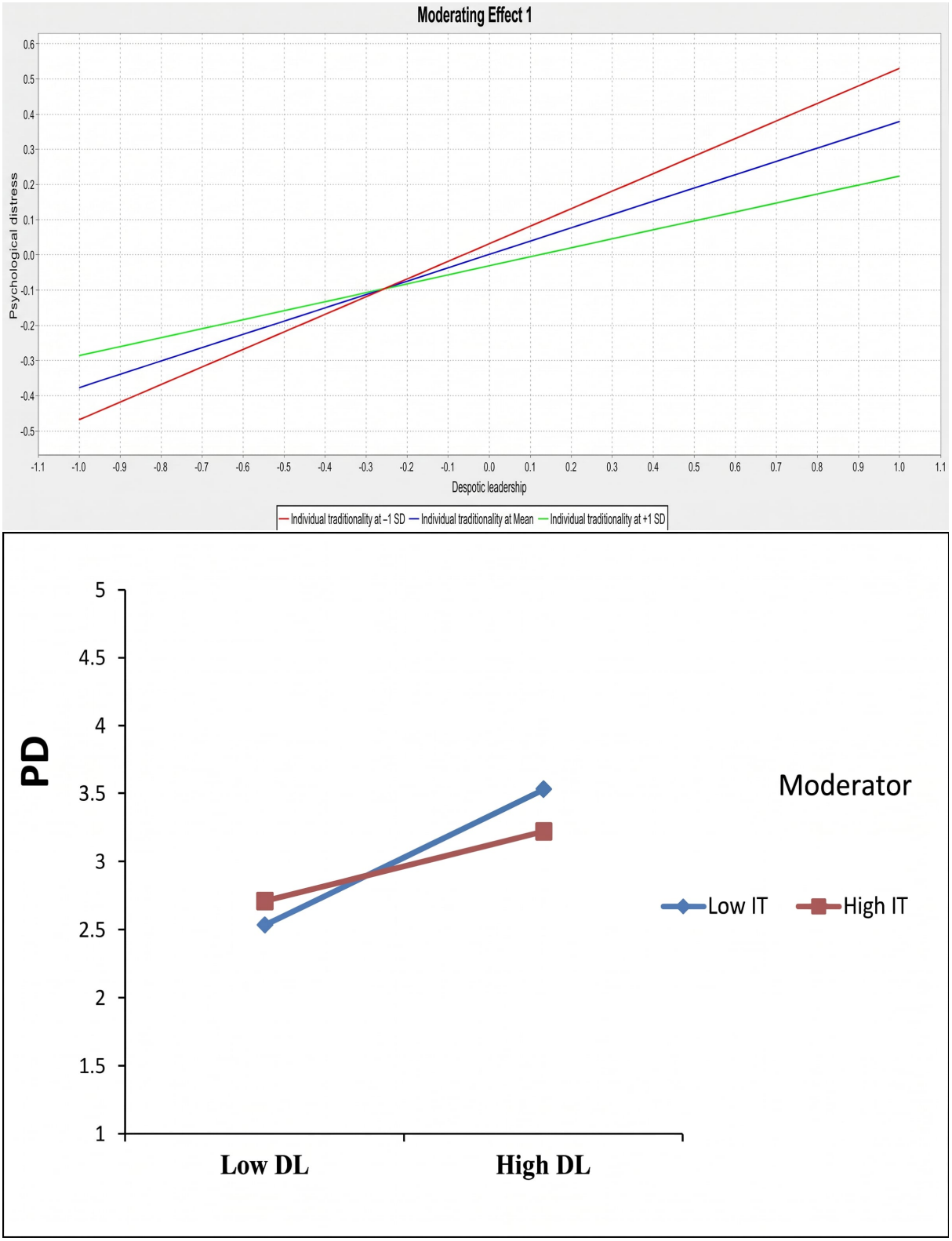


Figure 3. Interaction plot: individual traditionality (IT) weakens the association between despotic leadership (DL) and psychological distress (PD).

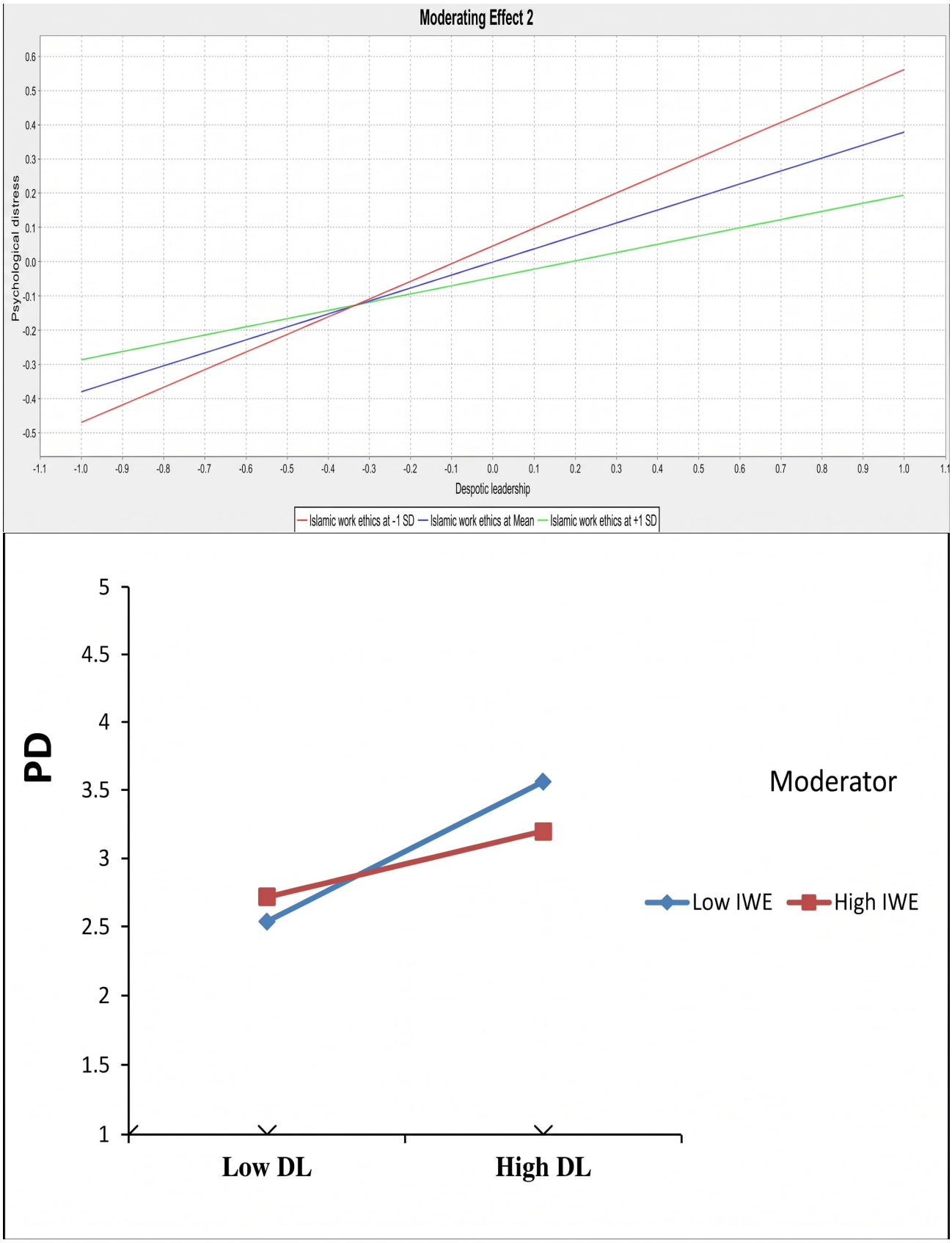


Figure 4. Interaction plot: Islamic work ethics (IWE) weakens the association between despotic leadership (DL) and psychological distress (PD).

5. Discussion

Our purpose was to trace how despotic supervision is linked to two familiar symptoms of maladjustment at work, withdrawal and counterproductive behavior, by way of psychological distress, and to ask whether traditional values and Islamic work ethics alter that process for employees of Saudi travel agencies and international hotels. The structural model tells a coherent story: despotic leadership is positively associated with psychological distress, distress is associated with more withdrawal and more counterproductive behavior, and withdrawal is itself associated with deviance. The significant serial indirect effect is consistent with the view that the link between destructive leadership and deviance runs partly through emotional depletion and disengagement. Its modest size ($\beta = 0.057$), together with the persistence of a direct path, shows that this route is one of several rather than the whole story. The coefficients in Table 4 allow a rough decomposition. Multiplying the reported paths, the indirect associations of despotic leadership with CWBs sum to about 0.216 (0.119 through distress alone, 0.057 through distress and withdrawal in sequence, and roughly 0.040 through withdrawal alone), against a direct path of 0.234; slightly under half (about 48%) of the total association of 0.450 is therefore indirect, and the serial route makes up about a quarter of that indirect portion. For withdrawal, about 59% of the total association (0.237 of 0.404) runs through distress. These are point estimates derived from the reported coefficients rather than separately tested effects, but they are consistent with the partial mediation reported in Section 4.2. Because all constructs were measured on the same occasion, the pattern is compatible with the proposed ordering but cannot establish it; a longitudinal design would be needed to show that employees actually move from strain to disengagement and then to harmful acts. These findings align closely with the Stressor–Strain–Outcome logic, which conceptualizes destructive leadership as a chronic interpersonal stressor that erodes psychological resources and ultimately manifests in dysfunctional behaviors [69]. The strong distress pathway is consistent with recent empirical work showing that despotic leadership heightens psychological distress and related strain reactions, which then spill over into negative employee outcomes [11,25]. The present results extend this evidence by modeling distress and withdrawal together, indicating that distress is not merely a parallel mediator for a single outcome but a shared strain linked both to disengagement and to weakened behavioral self-regulation. In doing so, the study complements prior work that has identified withdrawal as a mechanism between despotic leadership and performance [6] and integrates these insights into a more elaborate chain from leadership to deviance.

One feature of the results deserves comment. The association between distress and withdrawal ($\beta = 0.628$; HTMT = 0.795) was the strongest in the model. Both discriminant validity criteria were met, so the two constructs are empirically distinct, but their closeness is not surprising. In conservation of resources terms, withdrawal is the most immediate behavioral expression of depleted resources—the point at which the feeling that everything is an effort becomes the practice of doing less [57]. A strong PD–WW link is therefore what the proposed mechanism would lead one to expect. It also means that the serial pathway leans heavily on this single link, which shared method variance may have inflated, so the sequential interpretation should be read with corresponding caution.

Seen from a wider angle, the results add to research on workplace dysfunction by casting despotic leadership as a systemic condition of the organization, one associated with a chain of maladaptive responses rather than a series of isolated incidents. Rather than treating work withdrawal and counterproductive behaviors as separate phenomena, the sequential mediation model shows that strain, disengagement, and overtly harmful behavior are interlinked in a pattern consistent with progression, even though the present data cannot trace that progression over time. The findings challenge simple distinctions between

"functional" and "dysfunctional" employee behavior by showing that withdrawal and counterproductive acts may represent adaptive responses to a threatening organizational environment. This perspective aligns with recent scholarship on employee reification and dehumanization, suggesting that despotic leadership's power asymmetries and exploitation represent forms of organizational dysfunction that require systemic rather than individual-level remedies.

The pattern of moderation adds a crucial cultural and ethical layer to this stress process. Among employees high in traditionality, despotic leadership was less strongly tied to distress, a pattern consistent with the idea that those who accept hierarchical authority read authoritarian conduct as more legitimate and are therefore less wounded by it. This is consistent with emerging work showing that high power-distance or traditional value orientations mitigate the negative effects of despotic leadership on job outcomes [19]. Buffering is not immunity, however. Evaluated from the coefficients in Table 4, the slope of despotic leadership on distress falls from about 0.50 at one standard deviation below the mean of traditionality to about 0.26 at one standard deviation above it, and from about 0.51 to about 0.24 across the same range of Islamic work ethics; the association is roughly halved, not removed, as the simple slopes in Figures 3 and 4 also show. A similar dampening appeared for Islamic work ethics: religiously grounded commitments seem to supply a moral frame and a repertoire of coping that soften the emotional blow of destructive supervision. This buffering role converges with the distress-related findings of Zia et al. [16] but runs against the misfit pattern reported by Raja et al. [18], in which strong ethical convictions intensified the harm of an unethical leader. In the present context, Islamic work ethics appear to function more as a personal resource than as a source of value incongruence, perhaps because hospitality employees can anchor their identity and resilience in religious norms that are widely shared in Saudi society, even when local leadership fails. Taken together, these results answer recent calls for more integrative models that move beyond simple direct effects of despotic leadership to map out configurations of mediators and moderators [69,94]. By showing that despotic leadership is linked to well-being and behavior through a sequential distress–withdrawal pattern, and that these processes unfold differently depending on employees' traditional values and Islamic ethical commitments, the study offers a contextually rich explanation of why some employees quietly disengage while others escalate toward deviance under the same destructive leaders. In a sector where tourism development is central to national plans, these patterns suggest that tolerating despotic leadership is not a neutral managerial choice. It carries costs for employees' psychological health and, plausibly, for the service they deliver, although service quality itself was not measured here.

6. Study Implications

6.1. Theoretical Implications

Three theoretical implications follow. First, by placing psychological distress and work withdrawal in sequence between despotic leadership and counterproductive work behaviors, the study refines the Stressor–Strain–Outcome framework, showing that strain is associated with deviance not only directly but also through withdrawal—a serial pattern that the SSO framework accommodates but does not, on its own, specify. This layered mechanism complements prior evidence that psychological distress mediates the effects of despotic leadership on turnover intentions and other negative outcomes [4,11] and responds to calls for more nuanced process models of despotic leadership [69]. Second, the integration of individual traditionality and Islamic work ethics as moderators advances theorizing on boundary conditions in despotic leadership research. Prior work has highlighted that Islamic work ethics and value orientations can shape how employees experience

and respond to aversive leadership [18,39,45]. This study shows, within a single model, that both a culturally grounded value orientation (traditionality) and a religious-ethical resource (Islamic work ethics) weaken the stressor–strain linkage, thereby positioning them as protective factors in the SSO chain rather than merely as moderators of distal outcomes. Third, the study extends despotic leadership research into a high-contact service context in Saudi Arabia's tourism and hospitality sector, a setting that remains underrepresented in the dark leadership literature despite mounting evidence of its vulnerability to destructive supervisory practices [4,94]. By demonstrating substantial explanatory power for withdrawal and counterproductive behaviors among frontline service employees, the model underscores that despotic leadership is not only a concern for industrial or public-sector organizations but also a serious concern for experience-based service industries.

6.2. Managerial Implications

For practitioners, the results translate into a clear message: despotic leadership is not simply "tough management"; in our data it travels with poorer psychological health, weaker engagement, and more dysfunctional behavior, a slow-burning liability that organizations can anticipate and address. Managers and HR professionals in travel agencies and international hotels should treat the early symptoms of despotic supervision—excessive control, humiliation, self-serving decision-making, and punitive reactions—as red flags that require immediate intervention rather than as idiosyncrasies of "strong" leaders. Leadership development systems need to be recalibrated to identify and discourage despotic tendencies at the selection, promotion, and evaluation stages. In practice, this means writing indicators of ethical, empowering, and supportive conduct into appraisal criteria and multi-rater reviews, and running confidential climate surveys that can locate pockets of toxic supervision before they metastasize into widespread distress and deviance. At the unit level, line managers should be trained to recognize psychological distress and work withdrawal as warning signals, not as mere "attitude problems," and to respond with supportive conversations, workload adjustments, and access to counseling or employee assistance programs. The buffering roles of individual traditionality and Islamic work ethics suggest that values-based HR initiatives can be part of the solution, but they cannot be an excuse to tolerate destructive leaders. Structured ethics programs, reflective workshops on Islamic work values, and mentoring schemes led by respected senior staff may strengthen employees' internal resources and resilience, yet such initiatives must be paired with a zero-tolerance stance toward despotic behaviors. Ultimately, protecting psychological well-being and curbing counterproductive behaviors requires organizations to make a visible choice: to align leadership practices with their stated values rather than allowing a quiet drift toward authoritarian convenience.

6.3. Policy and Contextual Implications

Beyond the individual firm, the findings are relevant to the human-capital ambitions of Saudi Vision 2030, which names tourism and hospitality as growth sectors and lists human capability development and quality of life among its priorities [1]. The study measured individual perceptions and self-reported behavior, not service quality, organizational sustainability, SDG performance, or national tourism outcomes, so the implications that follow are offered as reasoned extensions rather than tested conclusions. With that caveat, the associations observed here—between despotic supervision, distress, and dysfunctional behavior—touch on concerns that SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) make explicit, and on the accountable workplace governance that SDG 16 encourages. Industry bodies and training providers could respond in proportionate ways: by including leadership ethics and employee mental-health

literacy in development programs for hotel and travel-agency managers, by encouraging confidential climate surveys and multi-rater feedback within voluntary quality and accreditation schemes, and by sharing good practice on how supportive supervision helps retain a national service workforce. Whether such measures would improve service or organizational performance remains a question for research that links leadership data to objective outcomes.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations temper these conclusions, and each points to further work. The first concerns design. The sample is reasonably large and spans both travel agencies and international hotels, but the data were gathered at a single point in time, which constrains strong causal inferences about the temporal ordering of despotic leadership, psychological distress, work withdrawal, and counterproductive behaviors. Longitudinal or multi-wave designs would allow future scholars to trace how distress and withdrawal unfold over time under despotic supervision and to test more rigorously the proposed sequential mediation. Second, every construct was self-reported. Procedural safeguards and statistical checks reduce, but cannot remove, the risk of common-method bias, and self-reports of deviance are also vulnerable to social desirability. Supervisor ratings, peer reports of counterproductive acts, and objective records such as absenteeism would allow the behavioral outcomes to be triangulated. Third, the research is situated in a single national and sectoral context—Saudi employees in tourism and hospitality—which, while theoretically rich, limits generalizability. Comparative studies across sectors (e.g., healthcare, education) and countries with different cultural profiles could examine whether the buffering effects of traditionality and Islamic work ethics are stronger in high power-distance, religiously homogeneous contexts than in more secular or egalitarian settings. Additionally, respondents were nested in a limited number of organizations, and no control-variable or sub-sector robustness checks were conducted; moreover, the strong PD–WW association, although empirically distinct, warrants cautious interpretation of the sequential pathway. Fourth, the model focuses on one destructive leadership style and a specific set of mediators and moderators. Future research could juxtapose despotic leadership with other dark styles—such as abusive supervision, narcissistic, or Machiavellian leadership—to test whether the same distress–withdrawal–deviance chain holds across the broader dark leadership spectrum. Likewise, additional personal and contextual resources, such as psychological capital, perceived organizational support, or high-quality leader–member exchange, may further illuminate how some employees manage to remain engaged and ethical under despotic leaders. Finally, interview-based or ethnographic work inside hotels and agencies could show what it is actually like to work for a despotic leader, and reveal the subtle ways in which cultural and religious norms are invoked either to resist or normalize authoritarian behavior.

8. Conclusions

Drawing on evidence from Saudi Arabia's tourism and hospitality sector, this study shows that despotic leadership is anything but a harmless quirk of managerial style. It behaves as a potent interpersonal stressor: it is associated with heightened psychological distress, which is in turn linked to work withdrawal and counterproductive behaviors—conduct that can compromise service and organizational effectiveness. By estimating the path from distress to withdrawal and on to deviance, the research moves beyond simple bivariate associations and portrays destructive leadership as the plausible starting point of a chain that erodes employees' emotional resources, attachment to work, and adherence to organizational norms—a chain whose unfolding over time longitudinal research must now confirm. At the same time, the study highlights that this chain is not deterministic.

Employees' traditional value orientations and their adherence to Islamic work ethics appear to soften the blow of despotic leadership, reducing the extent to which it is internalized as psychological pain. These findings do not absolve organizations of responsibility; rather, they underscore the ethical and strategic imperative to cultivate leadership practices that respect dignity and foster psychological safety, while also recognizing and reinforcing the cultural and religious resources employees draw upon to cope with adversity. In the broader conversation on dark leadership and sustainable work, the study's message is clear: allowing despotic leaders to thrive in tourism and hospitality organizations sits uneasily with aspirations for decent and healthy work. If Vision 2030 is to be realized not only in infrastructure and visitor numbers but also in the everyday experiences of frontline employees, protecting their psychological well-being deserves a place among organizational priorities rather than at their margins.

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