



Toxic Workplace, Mental Health and Employee Well-being, the Moderator Role of Paternalistic Leadership, an Empirical Study

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Abstract

Based on previous research results that recognized the role of paternalistic leadership in promoting a positive work climate, this study explored the impact of a toxic work environment on the mental health and well-being of employees. We used the quantitative methodology to collect and analyze data. A sample of 108 participants from Iraqi internet service provider (ISPs) companies represented the purposive study sample. We targeted employees who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. All data was collected through an electronic questionnaire (Google and Microsoft Forms). The research model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM). The results showed a negative effect of the toxic workplace on the mental health of employees. This also had a negative impact on their well-being. The results also indicated that paternalistic leadership has a positive effect on reducing the impact of toxic workplace on employees' mental health. This role was more apparent in modifying the negative relationship between mental health problems and employee well-being. The results showed that workplace bullying, in particular, is less affected by paternalistic leadership practices.

Keywords: Toxic Workplace, Mental Health, Employee Well-being, Paternalistic Leadership

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

As a result of the recovery of the business sector's normal activities after a period of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as an attempt to enhance normal business activities and restore traditional operations, business organizations tried to resume their activities by intensively utilizing resources, particularly human resources. In fact, this phenomenon was not only a result of resuming business activities soon as possible, but also aligned with the desire of employees who were deeply desire of working after a long period of isolation and staying at home. This led to a greater sense of loneliness, less belonging, and increased anxiety about managing their livelihoods and maintaining their career path. Employees returning to work after the pandemic faced new working conditions resulting from various factors, including changes in the perception and understanding of the new work environment that favors virtual work and gives less importance to the social relationships of employees as long as it comes with additional costs or administrative efforts. On the other hand, the employees themselves struggled to adapt to the new work environment that requires greater job commitment and lower levels of work-life balance.

For all of the above, several unexpected work-related issues have shown up, most of which are related to employees themselves, or external factors such as increasing layoff rates, the search for new technical skills, and the redistribution of tasks and positions. The increased additional pressure on employees has led to new forms of work-related stress, such as a toxic work environment that has a negative impact not only on employee performance, but also on their well-being and health in general. A toxic work environment can be formed through several motives, including those resulting from management practices such as discrimination, hostility, and unfair employment practices. It can also be generated by employees and colleagues themselves, such as bullying, verbal and physical abuse, and rejection of others. Regardless of the causes of a toxic workplace, it is certain that its impact will lead to undesirable performance results, such as weakened commitment, and decreased productivity at the very least. A toxic workplace can also result in higher employee turnover rates, undisciplined behavior towards colleagues or managers, higher levels of stress and work-related failures. All of these issues can deeply affect the management efforts and strategic direction of the company.

Toxic workplace can be caused by several factors including poor management, prevailing culture, weak communication and collaboration among employees, as well as practices of harassment and bullying, and high levels of exhaustion that lead to unexpected work problems. Academic works discuss types of toxic workplaces through three main causes, which are workplace harassment, bullying, and ostracism (Rasool et al., 2021). Harassment in the workplace refers to actions, behaviors, and conduct that are unacceptable or unwelcome in the workplace, and might explicitly included in the code of ethics. This includes the use of unacceptable language, sexual gestures, or unwanted physical actions that lead to hostile or offensive work environment (Gumbus & Lyons, 2011; Shetty & B V, 2017). Bullying in the workplace focuses on individual behaviors between employees, which can take the form of repeated and unjustified aggressive actions, behavior or conduct. Workplace bullying can take the form of continuous unjustified criticism, belittling others, threatening and gossiping in the workplace (Rai & Agarwal, 2016; Saunders et al., 2007; Yahaya et al., 2012). Employee ostracism occurs when an employee is treated unfairly, such as being excluded, isolated, given few tasks, and having a weak participation in key work issues (Gamian-Wilk & Madeja-Bien, 2018; H. Liu & Xia, 2016). In addition, employee ostracism may involve intentional or unintentional ignoring of the employee, especially with regard to social events, work meetings, and discussing of main plans and tasks, including strategically oriented issues (Chang et al., 2021).

Mental health is closely related to a toxic workplace, as a toxic workplace can have consequences closely related to the mental health of employees, such as increased stress levels, anxiety, fear, and insecurity. This can eventually lead to potential mental disorders such as depression and bad or unusual behavior. In fact, the mental health effects of employees are important for companies in terms of profitability and competition, not only that, but also in terms of the quality of the work environment within the company. (Fedorova & Dvorakova, 2014) concluded that the impact of a toxic workplace on employees' health leads to greater difficulties in achieving an acceptable level of employee well-being. To ensure that things go well, it is necessary for management to play its role in addressing and diagnosing the factors of the toxic workplace and monitoring its effect of the mental health of employees. This includes effective administrative strategies and programs aimed primarily at making the work environment of high quality and ensuring fairness and equality for all workers. It is highly likely that management actions are linked to improving employee well-being and, so, increasing productivity and improving operations.

This paper aimed to examine the relationship between toxic workplace, employees' mental health, and employees' well-being according to the moderator role of paternalistic leadership style. Thus, this paper build on a set of theories related to its variables. Firstly, it is widely believed that a toxic workplace leads to a decline in employees' well-being at work, which in turn has a negative impact on the overall performance of organizations. Secondly, employees' mental health is recognized as a positive factor in improving their well-being, and often means that a good work environment and job satisfaction is greater. Thirdly, management style is considered a key factor in improving the quality of the work environment and reducing potential deviations, and this may be the most important role of leadership in general. Therefore, the Paternalistic leadership style can alleviate the impact of a toxic workplace and transform it into a positive work environment. The paternal leadership style can also contribute to promoting employees' mental health by supporting the underlying factors. Finally, Paternalistic leadership can play a moderating role in the relationship between a toxic workplace and employees' mental health and direct it towards achieving higher levels of employee well-being.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Toxic Workplace

When the work environment is characterized by negativity and hostility, in which employees are exposed to verbal, physical, or emotional abuse from colleagues or management, this means that the work environment is a toxic. Various types of unacceptable behavior can be observed within a toxic workplace, such as narcissistic behavior, bullying, verbal abuse, threats, harassment, and so on. Such negative behavior may arise from colleagues or management within the work environment (Haeruddin et al., 2022; Rusdiyanto, 2022). The toxic workplace represents a direct threat not only to employees but also to stakeholders in general (Rasool et al., 2019). The toxic workplace has significant effects that extend beyond the boundaries of organizations and may ultimately create a new culture (Al Houry, 2022). Usually, two types of workplaces are distinguished, a collaborative workplace and a toxic workplace. The collaborative workplace refers to the opposite of the toxic workplace, where the work environment is characterized by intimacy, emotional exchange, active participation, and a sense of affiliation (Wang et al., 2020). Despite considering toxic workplace factors (such as toxic leadership, behavior, and colleagues) as individual issues, allowing any of these factors can enhance the rest, and thus increase the toxicity level in the work environment (Budak & Erdal, 2022; Erickson et al., 2015; Fraher, 2016).

According to (Rasool et al., 2019; Saepudin & Sary, 2022) Employees who have been exposed to a toxic work environment are more susceptible to stress, anxiety, fatigue, decreased productivity, difficulty communicating with others, and have a lower sense of importance and participation. A toxic workplace can lead to critical consequences, such as decreased productivity, reduced efficiency, the onset of conflicts within the workplace, and decreased commitment (Daniel & Harrison, 2020). Managing human resources tasks also can be more challenging within a toxic workplace, as it can be difficult to manage conflicts between employees or to complete HR tasks adequately in an unsupportive work environment (Kasalak, 2019). According to (Rasool et al., 2021) the main factors of a toxic workplace are: workplace harassment, workplace bullying, and finally workplace

ostracism. Workplace harassment refers to unacceptable or unwelcome behavior in the workplace based on individual protected characteristics for individuals. Such as unacceptable sexual phrases, threat of violence, sexual innuendo, touching certain areas of the body (Neall & Tuckey, 2014; Salin, 2008). Workplace bullying on the other hands Bullying in the workplace is any type of unwanted, repetitive, and continuous behavior that can cause emotional or/and physical harm to the employee. This act includes verbal abuse, sabotage, exclusion and intimidation or humiliation (Salin, 2021; Yao et al., 2020). Workplace ostracism occurs when employees feel that they are unable to do their job tasks due to being ignored or excluded by their colleagues or management. This feeling reduces their interaction with others and sense of belonging to the organization, resulting in isolation and decreased job satisfaction (Bedi, 2021; De Clercq et al., 2019).

Mental Health

Mental health at work refers to the positive environment in which employees' work, which enables them to feel satisfied and accomplished (Harnois & Gabriel, 2000; Hassard et al., 2011). Mental health is important in the work environment due to its role in helping employees deal with work pressures, reduce stress, and adapt to new challenges (Giorgi et al., 2020). Efforts to achieve mental health focus on making the work environment more productive and less conflictual (Chopra, 2009; Sarangi et al., 2022). Mental health problems can lead to low self-confidence, negatively affecting others in the work environment, and most importantly, a loss of motivation to achieve work goals (Goetzel et al., 2018). Several studies have demonstrated that mental health problems at the workplace lead to many negative effects, including: (Jansson & Gunnarsson, 2018; Leka & Nicholson, 2019; Rosander, Hetland, et al., 2022; Sierk et al., 2022) (1) Weak performance and productivity at work. (2) Increasing rates of absence and tardiness from work. (3) Increased rates of errors and malfunctions at work. (4) Deterioration of social relationships and communication among employees. (5) Decreased levels of job satisfaction and happiness at work. (6) Increased levels of stress and psychological pressure on employees. (7) Decreased overall level of health and well-being for employees.

Employee Well-being

Starting with the healthy workplace, as we mentioned earlier, it is the workplace where employees experience a higher level of satisfaction, a sense of belonging and participation as well. It can also be characterized by effective collaboration between managers and subordinates, with the aim of achieving higher levels of productivity. According to (Jones et al., 2019; Ryde et al., 2013) A healthy work environment leads to enhanced employee well-being, promoting positive behavior, and fostering a collaborative work climate. (Amir et al., 2021) defines employee well-being as a set of habits and behaviors within the workplace aimed at improving the mental and physical health of employees and contributing to their overall well-being. The benefits that organizations gain from employee well-being programs include increased productivity, higher morale, and reduced absenteeism rates due to illness (Sabharwal et al., 2019). In contrast, (Anderko et al., 2012) mentioned that employee wellness programs should justify the costs paid for. Although employee well-being efforts focus on the mental and physical safety of employees, they are no longer enough today unless coupled with other new initiatives such as financial employee well-being, employee education, and childcare initiatives (Makhanya, 2021). The National Wellness Institute (NWI) has concluded that there are six interrelated dimensions of employee wellness. These dimensions include occupational wellness (i.e., preferring a career path over a regular job), social wellness (i.e., positive interactions with colleagues), spiritual wellness (i.e., faith and beliefs), intellectual wellness (i.e., developing critical and constructive thinking skills), emotional wellness (i.e., feelings), and finally physical wellness (i.e., physical health exercises) (Bart et al., 2018; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020; Oliver et al., 2018).

Referring back to the conservation theory developed by (Hobfoll, 1989), individuals seek to obtain anything perceived as valuable or potentially useful for achieving personal or individual goals. It is not only about acquiring those resources but also preserving them. Thus, it becomes evident that many functional factors may affect employee well-being to varying degrees. (Barling & Frone, 2017) conducted an investigation about employee well-being through mental health and the general attitude towards work, he concluded that passive leadership has a negative impact on both sides. (Hakanen et al., 2018) believes that employee well-being depends on their current feelings, and this can deeply craft their jobs in the future. This is consistent with (Vander Elst et al., 2014) opinion, which concluded that the decline in employee well-being resulting from work pressures and job insecurity is attributed to their perceived lack of control. In his study discussing employee well-being after the COVID-19 pandemic, (Harju et al., 2021) mentioned that some employees were able to thrive and cope with the pressures of the pandemic, while others failed to do so. Several factors may contribute to employee well-being, including work-related and non-work-related factors. The work-related factors include workload (Holden et al., 2010), lack of autonomy (Gagné & Bhave, 2010), leadership and management style (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2013), ineffective work-life balance programs, a negative work environment, and limited career development opportunities, among others (Ajala, 2013). Personal relationships, social circumstances, financial difficulties, and others are the other factors that are not work-related (Gauche et al., 2017).

Paternalistic Leadership

Recently, researchers have become increasingly interested in management style within the workplace environment, considering it as a significant influencer in shaping and modifying the culture of the work

environment and then directing employee behavior towards what is right. (Sungur et al., 2019) acknowledges that leadership style can greatly influence the behavior and performance of employees and this influence may extend to social relationships within the work environment. (Babbitt, 2019; Y. Liu & Almor, 2016; Ugurluoglu et al., 2018) mention that the effect of leadership style on employee behavior varies from one environment to another; it particularly appears more clear in Eastern cultures than in Western cultures. In fact, the impact of leadership style seems to be more evident in cultures that tend to accept the power distance (Du et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2021). According to (Hofstede, 1985), "power distance" is the degree to which members of an organization, including employees, accept different levels of authority and influence.

The paternalistic leadership is viewed as a leadership style that combines concern for employees with balanced accountability (Bedi, 2020; Dedahanov et al., 2019). This concept is based on a work environment where leaders treat their employees as part of their family (Ünler & Kılıç, 2019). Thus, it is likely that the employees will accept this leadership style emotionally and respond positively to it (Yongyue et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2020). The principles of paternalistic leadership are based on taking care of employees, promoting the well-being of them, as well as showing concern for their personal issues (Gyamerah et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023). Accordingly, employees intend to achieve high job commitment, lower absenteeism rates, and a higher level of satisfaction (Aruoren, 2022; Ferreira et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2022). There is increasing evidence of a strong positive relationship between the paternalistic leadership style and employee well-being (Çiçek & Aktaş, 2022; Lee et al., 2023).

Hypotheses Development

Toxic workplace and mental health

Mostly, a toxic workplace has a negative impact on employees' mental health. This can be observed through higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression in the workplace. According to (Dvorakova & Fedorova, 2014), a toxic workplace environment creates unequal opportunities for employees and increases differences in rewards and recognition among them. This leads to instability and a state of uncertainty about the future. (Amna Anjum et al., 2018; Rasool et al., 2019) adds that the negative impact of a toxic workplace extends to include decreased performance and productivity. (Coldwell, 2019; Rosander, Salin, et al., 2022) clarified that the impact of toxic workplace on mental health worsens in today's information-based economy, where the added burden of job loss threat further affects employees' mental health. In fact, toxic workplace and mental health problems usually create a vicious cycle where one feeds into the other, ultimately having negative effects on employees' overall well-being and job performance. Thus, the toxic workplace seems to have a negative impact on employees' mental health. The discussion about the toxic workplace includes the three dimensions mentioned earlier, which are harassment, bullying, and ostracism in the work environment. This leads us to formulate the following hypothesis:

H_{01a}: Harassment has a negative effect on employees' mental health.

H_{01b}: Bullying has a negative effect on employees' mental health.

H_{01c}: Ostracism has a negative effect on employees' mental health.

Mental health and Employees Well-being

The mental health and well-being of employees are highly interconnected, and both are receiving increasing research attention (Johnson et al., 2020; Suter et al., 2020). In post-COVID research studies, a widely observed mutual impact relationship was noted between mental health and employee well-being. In several cases, mental health problems were considered a hindrance to employee well-being and did not include their satisfaction (Gorgenyi-Hegyes et al., 2021; Tuzovic & Kabadayi, 2021; Yu et al., 2021). (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009) examined the factors of employee well-being in the workplace and concluded that there is a direct correlation between mental health and workplace well-being, and thus the well-being of employees in general. (Hadadian & Sayadpour, 2018; Jensen & van der Voordt, 2020; Roemer & Harris, 2018) have explored the existence of a sequential relationship between mental health problems and employee well-being resulting from a toxic work environment as an initiating factor. Thus, the hypothesis is as follows:

H₀₂: Mental health problems has a negative effect on employees' well-being.

The moderator role of paternalistic leadership

In a wide range of research works, the relationship between workplace harassment and employee well-being seems clear. Employee well-being is reduced depending on the level of harassment prevalent in the work environment (Buchanan et al., 2018; Dionisi & Barling, 2018; Weźiak-Białowolska et al., 2020). Bullying in the workplace also leads to a decline in employee well-being (Hsu et al., 2019). This is directly associated with weak management intervention and, thus, a loss of confidence in change (S. Ahmad et al., 2020; Sprigg et al., 2019). Ostracism at the workplace creates a sense of isolation and reduces participation, which in turn leads to a less important role in performance (Feng et al., 2019). This weakens employees' sense of satisfaction and leaves a negative impression of their workplace, resulting in a lower level of well-being (Cheng & Ma, 2022; Fatima et al., 2023; Sarfraz et al., 2019; Zhang & Shi, 2017). As we mentioned before, the toxic work environment has a negative impact on the well-being of employees. Nevertheless, does that negative impact remain even with the presence of a leadership style that promotes participation and family work practices in the workplace? According to (Jang & Chen, 2022), the appropriate leadership style can modify or alleviate the impact of other negative factors in the workplace. Leadership based on family practices can modify the impact of toxicity within the workplace (Akgün et

al., 2019; Hayat & Afshari, 2021). In parallel, good leadership practices enhance the physical and mental health of employees (Ahmed et al., 2020; Stuber et al., 2021). According to (Bibi et al., 2020; Çetin et al., 2017; Çiçek & aktaş; Islam et al., 2022) , the good leadership style is considered one of the main factors in increasing employees' well-being. Paternalistic leadership (in its various forms) has a positive impact on the well-being of employees at varying levels. Paternalistic leadership enhances the family atmosphere within the work environment and encourages employees to be more committed and responsible. This leads to higher levels of well-being not only in the workplace but also in the personal lives of employees. We are testing the moderated role of paternalistic leadership in the relationship between toxic workplace, employees' mental health, and employees' well-being through the following hypothesis:

H_{03a}: Paternalistic leadership moderates the effect of workplace harassment on employees' well-being.

H_{03b}: Paternalistic leadership moderates the effect of workplace bullying on employees' well-being.

H_{03c}: Paternalistic leadership moderates the effect of workplace ostracism on employees' well-being.

H_{03d}: Paternalistic leadership moderates the effect of mental health problems on employees' well-being.

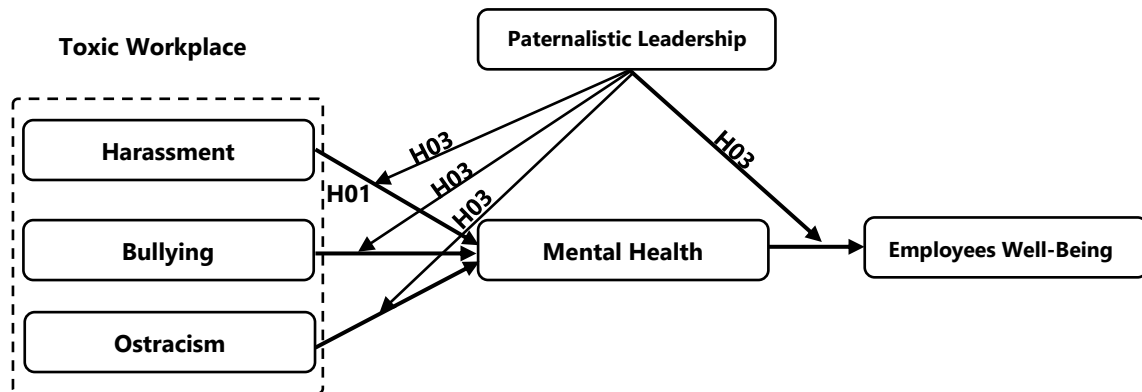


Figure 1. Conceptual model

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Preparing and Procedures

Despite the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on various business sectors, it later became apparent that the private sector was the most affected, as the pandemic caused the suspension of most commercial activities, leading to several financial and social difficulties. As some private sector companies had to continue working due to their direct involvement in the efforts to combat the pandemic, several indications have emerged regarding administrative difficulties in managing human resources in companies that provide internet services in Iraq (ISPs) (A. R. Ahmad & Murad, 2020; Hussein et al., 2020). ISPs have been selected to examine the effects of the COVID pandemic on employees in the workplace, including toxic workplaces, mental health problems, and employee well-being. We are also testing whether leadership style plays a role in mitigating negative effects in the workplace, taking into account the Iraqi business environment in which paternalistic leadership may yield better results due to accepted power distance. It has been confirmed that employees of ISPs were mostly committed to working full-time during the pandemic. Additionally, there were explicit signs of new work-related problems during that period, including a fear of infection spread and a preference for isolation for safety purposes. These new work-related problems had an impact on employee behavior even after the pandemic ended. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Communications, there are 21 internet companies operating in Iraq. The companies that represent the widest spread and coverage were selected, including Earthlink, Hurns, SuperCell, Al-Sard, and Scope Sky.

Instrument

A questionnaire has been designed to collect data distributed according to a 5-Point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree). An electronic version of the survey (Google and Microsoft Forms) was designed and distributed to the target sample for ease of access and response. The reliability tests of the questionnaire have been confirmed, and necessary modifications have also been made before its distribution. The responses showed an 86% (108 out of 126) response rate from the sample, indicating a good representation.

Measures and Scales

As for toxic workplace, (Ambreen Anjum et al., 2019; Kanwal et al., 2019; Rasool et al., 2021) scales have been adopted to measure workplace toxicity. (Rasool et al., 2021) scale was chosen to measure harassment in the workplace, (Ambreen Anjum et al., 2019) scale to measure harassment in the workplace, and finally (Kanwal et al., 2019) scale to measure ostracism in the workplace. The (Ahmadi et al., 2012) scale has been adopted to measure the mental health of employees. In measuring the well-being of employees, (Makhanya, 2021) scale has been

relied upon. Finally, a (Chaudhary et al., 2023) scale has been selected for measuring the paternalistic leadership variable.

Sampling

Iraqi internet service providers differ in terms of their structure, organizational hierarchy, and internal organization. Some of these companies are large, with branches in the provinces and a headquarters in the capital, Baghdad, and they have specialized administrative departments and units. The other consists of newly established companies that appear to be less mature in terms of organizational structure. There is no such uniform method for sampling systematically. Therefore, a purposive method was used to select the sample, focusing on employees who continued to work full-time during the COVID period. We targeted employees at the middle-level and low-level management, including small unit managers. 126 questionnaires were distributed, only 108 were returned.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Responses

Table 1. summarizes the sample's responses towards demographic variables (gender, age, job role, experience, and educational degree). Men make up the majority of employees in Iraqi ISPs at 76%. This is due to the nature of the job, which requires specialized external tasks, as well as the cultural preference for men to work more than women. 65% of the sample was from the young age group. The age range is between 25 and 38 years old. This percentage reflects the modernity of the field in which ISPs operate, which usually attracts younger age groups. Most of the respondent roles were technical, due to the nature of those companies and their greater need for technical expertise and skills. The years of work experience among the respondents are recent and range from 0 to 15 years, as the entire field is considered a new field in Iraq. Regarding educational degrees, most of the participants in the survey held a bachelor's degree. Following them were those who hold degrees lower than a bachelor's degree, such as professional certificates, and they represent workers in technical and supportive roles.

Table 1. Demographic Responses

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Gender	Male	82	76
	Female	26	24
Age	18-24 years	21	19
	25-31 years	34	32
	32-38 years	36	33
	39 or older	17	16
Role	Technical	43	40
	Administrative	21	19
	Supervisor	13	12
	Other	31	29
Experience	0-4 years	32	30
	5-9 years	41	38
	14-Oct	28	26
	Above 14 years	7	6
Education	Undergraduate	34	32
	Graduate	69	64
	Post-graduate	5	4
		n= 108	100

Preliminary analysis

We verified the reliability and validity of each variable of the four search variables separately. We used the The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test to check the quality of the model and the adequacy of the sample. Factor loading was used to verify the correlation of factors with the main components. The Cronbach's alpha test was used to check the internal consistency of the data. Table 2. show that all reliability and validity tests were acceptable. The factor loading values are above 0.7, which is good for measurement. The Cronbach's alpha and KMO are at the same level as the factor loading (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1978; Yong & Pearce, 2013). The average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) are both greater than 0.6, which indicates that the research tool is ready for measurement.

Table 2. Reliability and Validity Tests

	Items	Loading	KMO	Alpha	AVE	CR
Tox1	My supervisor/co-worker/subordinate often appreciates my physical appearance.	0.751				
Tox2	My supervisor/co-worker/subordinate spoke rudely to me in public	0.707				
Tox3	My supervisor/co-worker/subordinate often tries to be frank with me and shares dirty jokes with me.	0.827				
Tox4	My supervisor/co-worker/subordinate often tries to talk about my personal and sexual life.	0.725				
Tox5	I often feel devalued for my rights and opinions with reference to my age.	0.842				
Tox6	I receive negative responses from others because of my hard work.	0.801	0.897	0.931	0.677	0.931
Tox7	Several times i forced to attend supplementary meetings and training sessions	0.796				
Tox8	I am exposed to intimidator use of discipline/competency procedures.	0.821				
Tox9	My supervisor/co-worker/subordinate assigns me work that is not of my competence level.	0.832				
Tox10	My supervisor/co-worker/subordinate tries to maintain distance from me at work.	0.857				
Tox11	My supervisor/co-worker/subordinate does not answer my greeting.	0.811				
Tox12	Sometimes I feel that I am not doing anything special at work	0.737				
Mhl1	I feel unable to evaluate myself and my skills at work	0.839				
Mhl2	I act out uncontrollably when I feel stressed at work	0.788				
Mhl3	I have little interest or pleasure in doing things.	0.797	0.799	0.821	0.701	0.882
Mhl4	I'm worried that I will do something to look stupid in front of other colleagues.	0.814				
Ew1	I generally feel positive toward work at my organization.	0.762				
Ew2	When I am stressed, I feel I have the support available for help.	0.812				
Ew3	Our organizational culture encourages a balance between work and family life.	0.778	0.820	0.879	0.618	0.824
Ew4	Our organization provides aid in stress management.	0.734				
Pl1	My supervisor devotes all his/her energy to taking care of subordinates	0.813				
Pl2	My supervisor does not use his/her authority to seek special privileges for him/herself	0.751	0.828	0.907	0.658	0.876
Pl3	My supervisor determined all decisions in the organization whether they are important or not	0.769				
Pl4	My supervisor encourages me when I encounter arduous problems	0.718				

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Harassment	4.310	0.690	1					
2 Bullying	3.898	0.674	0.440**	1				
3 Ostracism	4.261	0.723	0.365**	0.780**	1			
4 Mental health	3.870	0.978	0.295**	0.648**	0.576**	1		
5 Employee well-being	4.060	0.832	0.436**	0.802**	0.735**	0.765**	1	
6 Paternalistic leadership	4.210	0.734	0.382**	0.697**	0.616**	0.632**	0.813**	1

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

Regarding the issue of a toxic workplace, bullying negatively affects mental health and can lead to unhealthy behaviors ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$). Being ostracized at work is a next second factor that causes mental health problems ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$). Harassment also negatively affects mental health, but to a moderate degree ($\beta = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, a toxic workplace leads to mental health problems for employees, and all its variables contribute to this undesirable effect. Mental health positively affects achieving and promoting employee well-being ($\beta =$

0.34, $p < 0.05$). Efforts to control mental health problems in the workplace can lead to making it a more suitable environment for employees and, and thus greater well-being for them.

Paternalistic leadership practices positively moderate the relationship between workplace harassment and employees' mental health ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.05$). Although the ability of paternalistic leadership to mitigate instances of workplace harassment is not at high levels in our case ($\Delta\beta = 0.054$), it is still an important factor in improving the work environment. In contrast, the moderating effect of paternalistic leadership does not seem clear in the relationship between workplace bullying and employees' mental health ($\Delta\beta = -0.047$). Although paternalistic leadership is slightly moderating that relationship ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.05$). It appears that workplace ostracism is slightly affected by the moderating role of paternalistic leadership in relationship to mental health ($\Delta\beta = 0.002$). This means that the leadership style does not contribute to enhancing relationships among employees within the workplace. However, there remains a positive moderating role of paternal leadership in the relationship between workplace bullying and employees' mental health ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$). Contrary to mental health, it appears that the role of paternalistic leadership is clearer and more powerful in positively moderating the relationship between employees' mental health and their well-being ($\beta = 0.63$, $p < 0.05$). Even while taking into consideration the negative effects that a toxic workplace can leave ($\Delta\beta = 0.19$).

Table 4. Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	CR	P	Decision
H01a	Harassment » mental health	0.259	0.065	3.182	0.002	Accepted
H01b	Bullying » mental health	0.436	0.058	4.994	0.000	Accepted
H01c	Ostracism » mental health	0.382	0.066	4.260	0.000	Accepted
H02	Mental health » well-being	0.440	0.103	5.041	0.000	Accepted
H03a	Harassment x paternalistic leadership » mental health	0.313	0.453	3.396	0.001	Accepted
H03b	bullying x paternalistic leadership » mental health	0.389	0.452	4.347	0.000	Accepted
H03c	Ostracism x paternalistic leadership » mental health	0.384	0.468	4.423	0.000	Accepted
H03d	mental health x paternalistic leadership » well-being	0.627	0.489	8.285	0.000	Accepted

Discussion

This research was conducted to explore the potential moderating role of paternalistic leadership in addressing some of the human resource management challenges faced by Iraqi internet companies, including workplace toxicity and employee mental health. The research draws its significance from previous relevant research discussions that emphasize the importance of monitoring the work environment and fostering a positive climate at work, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the beginning, we noticed a relatively high level of toxicity in the workplace. It is not known whether this phenomenon existed before the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is certainly present today at a level that requires more attention. (van Zoonen et al., 2021) concludes that crises may create new work conditions, some of which may be negative. (Rim, 2021; Somani et al., 2022) pointed to a direct link between the COVID-19 pandemic and an increase in toxicity in the workplace. Despite the great efforts announced to combat harassment, workplace harassment ranks highest among the search variables. We conclude that the problem of harassment in the work environment has not yet found sufficient solutions. It has been observed that a toxic workplace has a negative effect on employees' mental health. Harassment, bullying, and ostracism in the workplace contribute to the toxicity of the work environment, leaving a negative effect on the mental health and thus the employees' well-being. Contrary to expectations, the role of paternalistic leadership style was not significant enough to mitigate the impact of workplace toxicity on employees' mental health problems. However, paternalistic leadership has a positive impact on improving the relationship between toxic workplace and employees' mental health. We suggest that active attention to paternalistic leadership practices can enhance camaraderie and collaboration within the work environment to a greater extent. The positive role of paternalistic leadership is confirmed in many previous studies related to employee issues (Jia et al., 2020; Tu & Luo, 2020) including well-being (He et al., 2019).

Mental health affects the well-being of employees (O'Connor et al., 2021). This result seems to be logical, as mental health is linked to the employees' ability and desire to perform tasks. Employees cannot be more prosperous in a work environment that imposes more negative effects on their feelings and satisfaction with work (Hennekam et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2022). In fact, employees' mental health indicates a higher level of well-being (O'Connor et al., 2021). Clearly, leadership style affects the relationship between a toxic work environment and the mental health of employees. Although the impact of paternalistic leadership on the relationship between a toxic work environment and the mental health of employees is not that significant, it is still important and can be

improved to achieve better results. Paternalistic leadership has a greater impact on the relationship between harassment and ostracism in the workplace and the mental health of employees, unlike bullying, which is not affected by paternalistic leadership practices. Harassment is a socially rejected behavior in Iraq, and it is natural for employees to voluntarily distance themselves from such practices. Ostracism in the workplace usually stays under the control of management, and thus it becomes apparent that paternalistic leadership is more capable of easily mitigating its effects. Bullying in the workplace is an illegal and punishable practice that is not well-known yet. Several acts of bullying may be committed by colleagues unconsciously or without considering them humiliating or unacceptable actions. This requires the management to further clarify the acts of bullying.

Unfortunately, no further studies within the Iraqi business environment have been conducted that support our findings. However, there is still a highly important result that we have reached here. There are still a few research studies and academic works that precisely identify the common leadership styles in Iraq or the personality types of employees there. Due to the political and economic circumstances witnessed in Iraq, it is expected that bureaucratic leadership styles will be prevalent there. In the current study, we found signs of the paternalistic leadership style. Paternalistic leadership positively moderates the relationship between employees' mental health and their level of well-being. Initially, good leadership style will be able to accurately assess and identify mental health issues and work towards addressing them. A significant portion of mental health problems can be attributed to managerial or supervisory practices. Thus, solutions to mental health issues can be found through effective leadership practices. One indicator of employee well-being is a decrease in mental health problems. The positive role of leaders may be well recognized by employees, making leadership intervention necessary for improving the work environment. Paternalistic leadership is more accepted in Eastern societies (Shiuan et al., 2014). This can enhance leadership efforts towards establishing a positive work climate that also levels up employees' well-being. Paternalistic leadership is based on three integrative elements: authoritarianism, benevolence, and moral character leadership (Bedi, 2020). These elements contribute to regulating the pace of functional behavior within the workplace. Leadership practices can be harsh with aggressive behavior and, at the same time, tolerant with unintended behavior. Even with the varying degree of positive impact of paternalistic leadership in reducing workplace toxicity and addressing employees' mental health problems, the influence of leadership remains evident in the work environment regardless of the adopted style. In this study, we examined a highly friendly leadership style. We believe that feelings of love and belonging have a greater ability to positively influence the work environment. There may be different results when different leadership styles are employed. It is worthy to mention that all Iraqi internet service providers are newly established companies. We do not believe in the existence of fixed leadership styles that are difficult to change.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Conclusion

In this study, we examined the role of paternalistic leadership style in the relationship between workplace toxicity, represented by harassment, bullying, and ostracism, and employees' mental health and well-being. Bullying was found to have the most significant impact on employees' mental health, followed by ostracism and then workplace harassment. Although the mean in the descriptive statistics of harassment was the highest, its impact on mental health was found to be low. All the toxic elements in the workplace affect the mental health of employees, and thus the toxic workplace can be considered a negative factor in mental health overall. On the other hand, mental health problems affect the well-being of employees. It is certain that employees who suffer from physical and mental health problems are more susceptible to weak performance and productivity, less job satisfaction, and therefore lower levels of well-being.

There is a varying degree of the paternalistic leadership's effect on the relationship between the toxic work environment and the mental health of employees. This role seems more apparent in reducing the impact of harassment and ostracism in the workplace and less intense in cases of bullying. It is difficult to determine the reasons for the difference in the impact of leadership styles on interpersonal relationships within the work environment. This impact can vary in intensity from one case to another. What can be inferred here is that the paternalistic leadership style is widely accepted in the Iraqi business environment, even without official recognition of its name. We believe that the paternalistic leadership style is not implemented perfectly or comprehensively. Perhaps there is a greater reliance on certain elements of it than others. However, the impact of paternalistic leadership seems clear in the relationship between employees' mental health and well-being. Paternalistic leadership contributes to creating a more relaxed work environment, reducing sources of mental health problems, and thereby improving employees' well-being. It is also important to note that one of the most important goals of paternalistic leadership is to care for employees intimately and attend to their well-being.

Implication

The results of this study alert leaders and policymakers within organizations to a range of administrative issues. A toxic work environment leads to decreased productivity and performance, as well as more tense relationships between employees and management. It is essential to constantly monitor the level of toxicity in the workplace. Tolerating cases of harassment, bullying, and ostracism can lead to negative results that are difficult to control later on. The Iraqi business environment is underdeveloped in realizing new employee issues, such as workplace toxicity. There is a greater need for more efforts and practices to mitigate the impact of these new issues. The management can consider allocating sufficient financial resources to enhance the well-being of the employees. These efforts are directly linked to job satisfaction and commitment. Enhancing leadership practices, including paternal leadership, is important to achieve a high level of workplace health. The concept of power distance is more widely accepted in the business environment in Eastern countries. This could increase the acceptance of managerial interventions and therefore enhance healthy work practices and focus on a productive work climate.

Limitation

The current study faced a number of limitations. Firstly, there is no accredited reference for indexing Iraqi internet service provider companies, including their main data (number of employees, management levels, employee-to-management ratio, etc.). Secondly, accessing the employees was very difficult, as there were administrative restrictions that prevented employees from participating in research surveys without the approval of the management. Thirdly, the current study was applied to Iraqi internet companies, which is a relatively small sector. Future studies can consider larger sectors or different fields of work. Fourthly, there are fewer relevant previous studies conducted in Iraq, which makes it difficult to compare the results and identify potential areas for improvement.

Recommendation

In this study, we adopted paternalistic leadership as a moderator variable. Other styles of leadership, such as benevolent or ethical leadership, could be investigated as moderator/mediator variables. We assumed that employee well-being is highly dependent on their mental health, and therefore measuring mental health is necessary to understand the impact of workplace toxicity on employee well-being. Future studies could explore other factors related to employee well-being, such as job satisfaction and work-life balance programs.

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