Dark Triad Traits and the Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships in Organisational Settings

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Dark personality traits have emerged as important determinants of interpersonal functioning in organisational settings. Yet the extent to which such traits predict the sustained maintenance of toxic professional relationships, defined as the continued engagement with harmful, stressful, or dysfunctional workplace ties, remains underexplored. This study investigates the direct effects of the three Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) on the Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships (ETPR), as well as the conditional effects of organisational culture. Data were collected from 396 respondents across corporate, academic, and student populations using a structured self-report questionnaire. Multiple regression analysis revealed that Machiavellianism ($\beta = 0.433$, $p < 0.001$) and narcissism ($\beta = 0.516$, $p < 0.001$) were significant positive predictors of ETPR. In contrast, psychopathy ($\beta = -0.234$, $p < 0.001$) exerted significant negative effects. When accounting for individual personality variance, organisational culture emerged as a significant negative covariant ($\beta = -0.122$, $p = 0.004$). The overall model explained 50.7% of the variance in ETPR. Moderation analysis revealed no significant interaction between organisational culture and any Dark Triad trait ($\Delta R^2 = 0.007$; all $p > 0.20$), indicating that within this sample, institutional culture functions primarily as a direct contextual baseline rather than a boundary condition. Findings advance understanding of personality-driven relational endurance in toxic workplace environments and carry implications for human resource management, organisational culture design, and employee well-being interventions.

Keywords: *Dark Triad, Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, endurance of toxic professional relationships, organisational culture, workplace behaviour*

Introduction

Workplace relationships play an important role in shaping employees' well-being, performance, and professional development. Positive relationships foster trust, collaboration, and psychological safety, whereas toxic professional relationships can lead to stress, emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and lower organisational commitment. Although workplace toxicity has received growing scholarly attention, relatively little is known about why some individuals continue to remain in professional relationships they perceive as harmful.

One possible explanation lies in personality. The Dark Triad framework, comprising Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, has been widely linked to problematic interpersonal behaviour, counterproductive work practices, and toxic leadership. However, most research has focused on how individuals with these traits contribute to workplace dysfunction rather than how such traits may influence their willingness to endure toxic professional relationships. Understanding this issue is important because the continued tolerance of harmful workplace ties may reinforce dysfunctional dynamics and contribute to broader organisational problems.

Each Dark Triad trait may influence relationship endurance differently. Individuals high in Machiavellianism may tolerate toxic relationships when they perceive strategic or professional benefits. Narcissistic individuals may remain in such relationships if they continue to receive recognition, status, or validation. In contrast, individuals with higher levels of psychopathy,

characterised by emotional detachment and impulsivity, may be less likely to remain in harmful relationships due to weaker emotional investment.

Personality, however, does not operate in isolation. Organisational culture, reflected in shared values, norms, and behavioural expectations, may either discourage or reinforce the persistence of toxic professional relationships. Supportive cultures that promote ethical behaviour, open communication, and psychological safety may encourage employees to address or exit harmful situations, whereas permissive cultures may normalise them.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the effects of Dark Triad personality traits on the Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships (ETPR), the direct effect of organisational culture on ETPR, and the moderating role of organisational culture. Using data from 396 respondents, the study provides an integrated examination of how personality and organisational context influence the persistence of toxic professional relationships.

1.1 Research Objectives

The present study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the direct effects of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy on the Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships (ETPR).
2. To investigate the direct effect of organisational culture on ETPR.
3. To determine whether organisational culture moderates the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and ETPR.
4. To generate theoretical and practical insights into the factors that contribute to the persistence of toxic professional relationships in workplace settings.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of research on dark personality traits in organisational settings by shifting attention from the creation of toxic workplace dynamics to the factors that sustain them. By examining the Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships (ETPR), the study highlights an important but relatively underexplored aspect of workplace behaviour and broadens current understanding of how personality influences relationship persistence.

From a practical perspective, the findings may help human resource professionals, organisational leaders, and employee well-being practitioners identify personality-related factors that increase the likelihood of employees remaining in harmful professional relationships. Such insights can support the development of healthier workplace environments, stronger interpersonal boundaries, and more effective interventions for managing workplace toxicity.

Methodologically, the study provides an empirical framework for examining the combined influence of personality traits and organisational factors on workplace relationships. The use of a relatively large and diverse sample (N = 396) offers a foundation for future research in this area. At the same time, the study acknowledges certain methodological limitations, particularly regarding the measurement of organisational culture, and highlights opportunities for future research to further refine and validate the proposed framework.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 The Dark Triad: Conceptual Overview

The Dark Triad framework, introduced by Paulhus and Williams (2002), comprises three distinct but related personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Although conceptually

different, these traits share characteristics such as self-interest, callousness, and interpersonal antagonism. Research has consistently linked the Dark Triad to negative workplace outcomes, including unethical behaviour, counterproductive work practices, and toxic leadership.
Machiavellianism reflects manipulation, strategic thinking, and a willingness to pursue personal goals through pragmatic means. Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, and a strong need for admiration and recognition. Psychopathy involves emotional detachment, impulsivity, and a lack of empathy. Together, these traits provide a useful framework for understanding interpersonal behaviour in organizational settings.

2.2 Toxic Professional Relationships and ETPR

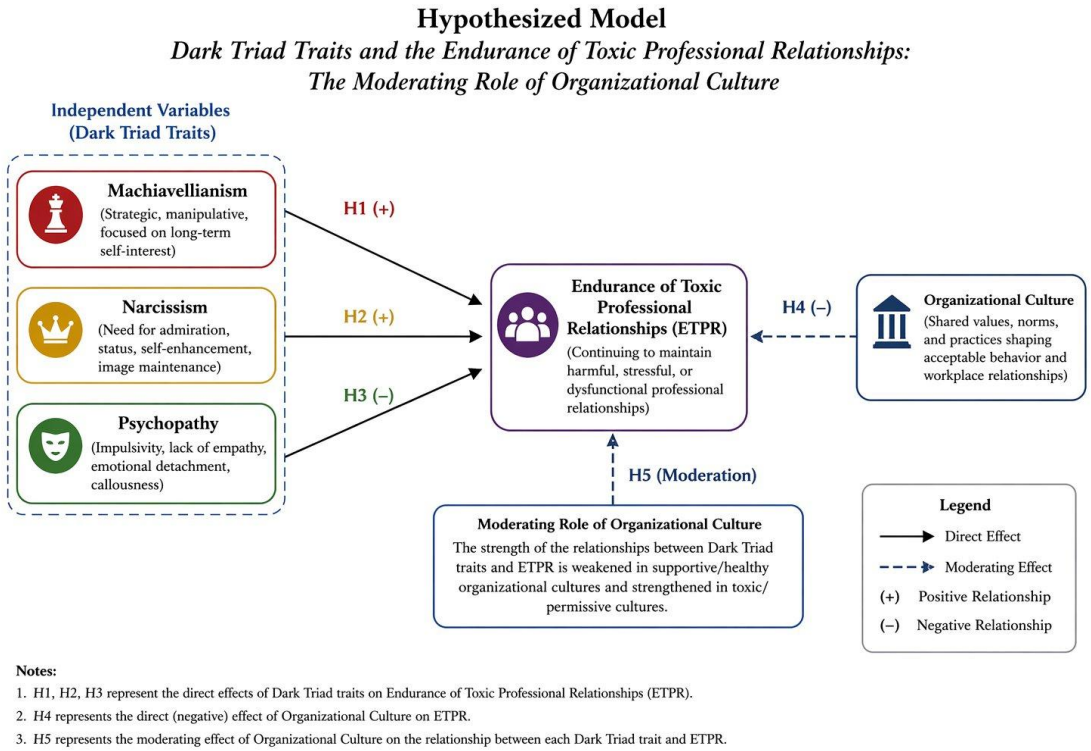
Toxic professional relationships are workplace relationships characterized by persistent conflict, manipulation, exploitation, or other harmful interactions. While the consequences of such relationships have been widely studied, less attention has been given to understanding why individuals continue to remain in them.
The Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships (ETPR) refers to an individual's tendency to persist in harmful professional relationships rather than exit or renegotiate them. Existing research suggests that factors such as fear of professional consequences, dependency, relational inertia, and sunk-cost thinking may contribute to such persistence. Personality traits that encourage strategic tolerance of harm or a need for external validation may therefore be important predictors of ETPR. As ETPR is a researcher-developed construct, further validation is needed in future studies.

2.3 Hypotheses Development

Machiavellianism and ETPR
Individuals high in Machiavellianism tend to view relationships instrumentally and may tolerate toxicity when it serves a strategic purpose. They are often willing to endure short-term discomfort in pursuit of longer-term personal or professional gains. Accordingly:
H1: Machiavellianism is positively related to the endurance of toxic professional relationships.
Narcissism and ETPR
Narcissistic individuals seek admiration, status, and validation. They may continue harmful professional relationships if those relationships provide opportunities for recognition or reinforce their self-image. Accordingly:
H2: Narcissism is positively related to the endurance of toxic professional relationships.
Psychopathy and ETPR
Psychopathic individuals are typically characterized by emotional detachment and limited interpersonal attachment. As they are less likely to experience the emotional bonds that sustain harmful relationships, they may be more willing to disengage from them. Accordingly:
H3: Psychopathy is negatively related to the endurance of toxic professional relationships.
Organizational Culture and ETPR
Organizational culture influences workplace norms and expectations. Supportive cultures that promote ethical behaviour, open communication, and psychological safety may discourage the continuation of harmful professional relationships. Accordingly:
H4: Organizational culture is negatively related to the endurance of toxic professional relationships.
Moderating Role of Organizational Culture
Organizational culture may also influence how personality traits affect ETPR. Supportive cultures may weaken the tendency of individuals with dark personality traits to remain in toxic relationships, whereas permissive cultures may strengthen it. Accordingly:

H5: Organizational culture moderates the relationship between Dark Triad traits and the endurance of toxic professional relationships, such that these relationships are weaker in supportive organizational cultures.

Figure 1 – Hypothesised Model



Source: Researcher's own conceptual framework (Generated using Claude AI). Solid arrows = direct effects; dashed arrows = moderating effects. (+) = positive relationship; (−) = negative relationship.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships between Dark Triad personality traits, organisational culture, and the Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships (ETPR). A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables the statistical testing of hypothesised relationships among variables. The cross-sectional design allowed for the collection of data at a single point in time and is consistent with prior research examining personality and workplace behaviour. However, as data were collected simultaneously, causal inferences cannot be established.

3.2 Sample and Participants

Data were collected from 396 respondents in India using a non-probability purposive sampling approach. Participants were selected based on their current or recent exposure to professional or academic environments, enabling them to provide informed responses regarding workplace relationships and organisational experiences. Following data screening for completeness and response quality, 396 usable responses were retained for analysis.

The sample consisted of respondents from corporate, academic, and student backgrounds. Nearly half of the participants (47.2%) were below 25 years of age, while 27.8% were between 25 and 34 years.

In terms of educational qualifications, 50.0% held a Master's degree, and 38.9% held a Bachelor's degree. Corporate employees represented the largest occupational group (52.8%), followed by students (30.6%) and academic or educational professionals (11.1%). Middle-management employees constituted the largest organisational category (36.1%).

The inclusion of student respondents broadens the diversity of the sample but may limit the generalisability of findings to fully employed workforce populations. Consequently, the results should be interpreted with caution, and future studies may benefit from conducting subgroup analyses or focusing exclusively on working professionals.

Table 1 – Demographic Variables

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
Below 25	187	47.2
25–34	110	27.8
35–44	55	13.9
45–54	44	11.1
Education		
Master's Degree	198	50
Bachelor's Degree	154	38.9
CA / Professional Qualification	22	5.6
High School / Diploma	22	5.6
Profession		
Corporate Employee	209	52.8
Student	121	30.6
Academic / Educator	44	11.1
Entrepreneur / Business Owner	22	5.6
Position		
Middle Management	143	36.1
Entry-level / Associate	88	22.2
Executive / Leadership	44	11.1
Senior Management	11	2.8
Others	66	16.7
Total	**396**	**100**

Note. N = 396

3.3 Measures

All constructs were measured using five-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Scale items were adapted from established instruments in the personality and organizational behaviour literature.

Machiavellianism (4 items). Items were adapted from the Machiavellianism subscale of the Short Dark Triad (SD3) developed by Jones and Paulhus (2013). The scale assessed tendencies toward

strategic manipulation, pragmatism, and self-interested behaviour (e.g., "I tend to manipulate others to get what I want").

Narcissism (4 items). Items were adapted from the narcissism subscale of the SD3 and measured grandiosity, entitlement, and the need for admiration and recognition (e.g., "I know that I am special because everyone keeps telling me so").

Psychopathy (4 items). Items were adapted from the psychopathy subscale of the SD3 and assessed impulsivity, callousness, and lack of empathy (e.g., "I tend to act without thinking about the consequences").

Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships (ETPR) (4 items). ETPR was operationalised as an individual's tendency to remain in professional relationships perceived as harmful or dysfunctional. The scale was developed by the researcher based on the conceptual definition of ETPR and included items such as "I continue to maintain professional relationships even when they are harmful to my well-being." The scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in the present sample, and its psychometric properties are reported in Section 4.

Organisational Culture (4 items). Items were adapted from the Organisational Culture Profile (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) and assessed perceptions of organisational supportiveness, ethical values, and openness (e.g., "My organisation promotes a healthy and supportive work environment"). Reliability and validity statistics for this construct are presented in Section 4.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and inter-construct correlations for all study variables. Machiavellianism recorded the highest mean score (M = 3.13, SD = 0.98), followed by psychopathy (M = 2.82, SD = 0.68) and narcissism (M = 2.50, SD = 0.81). ETPR demonstrated a relatively low mean score (M = 2.16, SD = 1.01), while organisational culture recorded the highest overall rating (M = 3.71, SD = 0.50).

All three Dark Triad traits were positively and significantly correlated with ETPR: Machiavellianism ($r = 0.566$, $p < 0.001$), narcissism ($r = 0.629$, $p < 0.001$), and psychopathy ($r = 0.239$, $p < 0.001$). Organisational culture was not significantly correlated with ETPR ($r = 0.055$, $p = 0.275$). Correlations among the Dark Triad traits ranged from 0.486 to 0.655 and were all statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Table 2 – Descriptive Statistics and Inter-Construct Correlations

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Machiavellianism	3.13	0.98	**[0.835]**	0.620***	0.655***	0.566***	0.275***
2. Narcissism	2.5	0.81	0.620***	**[0.752]**	0.486***	0.629***	0.342***
3. Psychopathy	2.82	0.68	0.655***	0.486***	**[0.663]**	0.239***	0.507***
4. ETPR	2.16	1.01	0.566***	0.629***	0.239***	**[0.867]**	0.055 (ns)
5. Org. Culture	3.71	0.5	0.275***	0.342***	0.507***	0.055 (ns)	**[0.577]**

Note. Diagonal values in brackets represent the square root of AVE. ***p < .001.

4.2 Reliability and Validity

Organizational culture demonstrated lower-than-recommended reliability and validity values (α = 0.208, CR = 0.655, AVE = 0.333). Accordingly, findings involving this construct should be interpreted with caution.

Table 3 – Reliability and Validity Summary

Construct	Items	α	CR	AVE	√AVE	Factor Loadings
Machiavellianism	4	0.854	0.902	0.697	0.835	0.837, 0.785, 0.927, 0.784
Narcissism	4	0.741	0.838	0.565	0.752	0.803, 0.682, 0.702, 0.812
Psychopathy	4	0.571	0.756	0.440*	0.663	0.628, 0.796, 0.589, 0.620
ETPR	4	0.889	0.923	0.751	0.867	0.871, 0.845, 0.899, 0.851
Org. Culture	4	0.208*	0.655*	0.333*	0.577	0.362, 0.659, 0.538, 0.692

Note. Note. α = Cronbach's Alpha; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; √AVE = Square Root of AVE. Recommended thresholds: α > .70, CR > .70, AVE > .50.

4.3 Discriminant Validity

Table 4 presents the Fornell-Larcker matrix for discriminant validity assessment. Machiavellianism (√AVE = 0.835), narcissism (√AVE = 0.752), and ETPR (√AVE = 0.867) satisfied the Fornell-Larcker criterion, with their square root AVE values exceeding all corresponding inter-construct correlations. Psychopathy (√AVE = 0.663) was borderline, as its correlation with Machiavellianism (r = 0.655) approached its diagonal value (difference = 0.008), suggesting only marginal discriminant validity from Machiavellianism. Organisational culture (√AVE = 0.577) failed the criterion: its correlation with psychopathy (r = 0.507) exceeded its diagonal value, indicating a lack of discriminant validity from psychopathy. These findings suggest limited discriminant validity for the organisational culture construct and should be considered when interpreting culture-related results

Table 4. Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	Machiavellianism	Narcissism	Psychopathy	ETPR
Machiavellianism	[0.835]	0.62	0.655	0.566
Narcissism	0.62	[0.752]	0.486	0.629
Psychopathy	0.655	0.486	[0.663]	0.239
ETPR	0.566	0.629	0.239	[0.867]

Note. Diagonal values represent the square root of AVE. Discriminant validity is supported when each diagonal value exceeds the corresponding inter-construct correlations.

4.4 Regression Analysis

Psychopathy emerged as a significant negative predictor of ETPR (B = −0.346, β = −0.234, t = −4.442, p < 0.001), supporting H3. Notably, the direction of the regression coefficient differed from the positive bivariate correlation observed in Table 2, indicating a potential suppressor effect. This pattern is examined further in the Discussion section.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Analysis (DV = ETPR)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	β	VIF	Sig.
Intercept	1.047	0.271	3.858	< 0.001	—	—	***
Machiavellianism	0.445	0.055	8.08	< 0.001	0.433	2.74	***
Narcissism	0.642	0.058	11.085	< 0.001	0.516	1.89	***
Psychopathy	−0.346	0.078	−4.442	< 0.001	−0.234	2.81	***
Org. Culture	−0.245	0.085	−2.889	0.004	−0.122	1.38	**

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardised coefficient; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor. ***p < .001; **p < .01.

4.5 Moderation Analysis

None of the interaction terms reached statistical significance, indicating that organisational culture did not moderate the relationship between Dark Triad traits and ETPR. Accordingly, H5 was not supported. Given the measurement limitations associated with the organisational culture construct, these findings should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 6. Moderation Analysis — Hierarchical Regression with Interaction Terms (DV = ETPR)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	Block	Sig.
Intercept	2.187	0.043	50.808	< 0.001	—	***
Machiavellianism (c)	0.422	0.061	6.961	< 0.001	*Main*	***
Narcissism (c)	0.628	0.063	9.925	< 0.001	*Main*	***
Psychopathy (c)	−0.307	0.082	−3.765	< 0.001	*Main*	***
Org. Culture (c)	−0.159	0.096	−1.658	0.098	*Main*	ns
Machiavellianism × OC	−0.173	0.136	−1.273	0.204	*Interaction*	ns
Narcissism × OC	0.106	0.132	0.805	0.422	*Interaction*	ns
Psychopathy × OC	−0.108	0.141	−0.767	0.444	*Interaction*	ns

Note. All predictors were mean-centred before interaction term creation. $\Delta R^2 = .007$. ***p < .001.

4.6 Hypothesis Summary Table

Table 7 – Hypothesis Summary Table

Hyp.	Relationship	Direction	Key Evidence	p-value	Decision	Sig.
H1	Machiavellianism → ETPR	Positive (+)	B=0.445, β=0.433, t=8.08	< 0.001	**Supported**	***
H2	Narcissism → ETPR	Positive (+)	B=0.642, β=0.516, t=11.09	< 0.001	**Supported**	***
H3	Psychopathy → ETPR	Negative (−)	B=−0.346, β=−0.234, t=−4.44	< 0.001	**Supported (Conditional)***	***
H4	Org. Culture → ETPR	Negative (−)	B=−0.245, β=−0.122, t=−2.89	0.004	**Supported†**	**
H5	OC × Dark Triad → ETPR	Moderating	ΔR^2=0.007, all interactions ns	> 0.200	**Not Supported†**	ns

Note. Decisions based on $p < .05$.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Main Effects

Machiavellianism and ETPR (H1 – Supported)

The positive relationship between Machiavellianism and ETPR supports the proposition that strategically oriented individuals may tolerate harmful professional relationships when they perceive potential personal or career-related benefits. Consistent with prior research, Machiavellian individuals appear willing to prioritize long-term goals over relational comfort, viewing workplace relationships as instrumental resources rather than purely social connections. This finding suggests that toxic relationship endurance may, in some cases, reflect calculated self-interest rather than emotional attachment.

Narcissism and ETPR (H2 – Supported)

Narcissism emerged as the strongest predictor of ETPR, highlighting the importance of recognition, status, and self-enhancement motives in sustaining harmful workplace relationships. Individuals high in narcissism may continue relationships that provide visibility, validation, or perceived prestige despite their negative consequences. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that narcissistic individuals prioritize self-enhancement and external affirmation over relationship quality.

The result also indicates that the endurance of toxic professional relationships may be driven not only by strategic considerations but also by identity-related motives.

Psychopathy and ETPR (H3 – Supported)

Psychopathy demonstrated a significant negative relationship with ETPR in the multivariate model. This finding is consistent with theoretical perspectives that characterize psychopathic individuals as emotionally detached and less constrained by interpersonal obligations. Such individuals may be less likely to remain in harmful relationships because they experience lower levels of emotional investment and relational commitment.

At the same time, the positive bivariate association observed between psychopathy and ETPR suggests that this relationship is more complex than initially anticipated. The divergence between the correlation and regression results indicates that the unique effect of psychopathy should be interpreted cautiously and warrants further investigation in future research.

Organizational Culture and ETPR (H4 – Supported)

Organizational culture demonstrated a significant negative relationship with ETPR, suggesting that supportive workplace environments may reduce the likelihood that employees remain in harmful professional relationships. Organizations that promote ethical behaviour, open communication, and psychological safety may encourage individuals to address or disengage from toxic workplace interactions. However, because the organizational culture measure exhibited weak reliability in the present study, this finding should be regarded as preliminary and requires replication using more robust measurement instruments.

5.2 The Non-Significant Moderation Effect (H5)

The results did not support the proposed moderating role of organizational culture. This suggests that organizational culture may not substantially alter the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and ETPR. Instead, culture may operate primarily as a direct contextual influence on relationship endurance.

At the same time, the absence of significant moderation effects should be interpreted cautiously. The limited reliability and variability of the organizational culture measure may have reduced the ability to detect interaction effects. Consequently, additional research using more robust measures of organizational culture is needed before firm conclusions can be drawn regarding the moderating hypothesis.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it introduces the Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships (ETPR) as a distinct outcome variable, extending research beyond the creation of workplace toxicity to its persistence. Second, it provides an integrated examination of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy as predictors of toxic relationship endurance, demonstrating that the three traits exhibit distinct relationships with ETPR. Third, it highlights the potential role of organizational context by examining the direct and moderating effects of organizational culture. Collectively, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how personality and workplace environments shape the persistence of harmful professional relationships.

5.4 Practical Implications

The findings have implications for organizational practice. For human resource professionals, the results highlight the importance of considering personality-related factors when addressing workplace relationship challenges. In particular, the strong association between narcissism and ETPR suggests

that recognition-seeking tendencies may influence employees' willingness to remain in harmful professional relationships.

For organizational leaders, the findings reinforce the value of promoting psychologically safe and ethically grounded workplace cultures. Initiatives that encourage open communication, healthy interpersonal boundaries, and appropriate mechanisms for addressing workplace conflict may help reduce the persistence of toxic professional relationships.

For occupational psychologists and workplace coaches, the findings suggest that individual personality differences may play an important role in shaping employees' responses to harmful workplace experiences. Interventions aimed at strengthening self-awareness, boundary-setting, and healthy relationship management may therefore prove beneficial.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.

First, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions, as all variables were measured at a single point in time. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to examine how toxic professional relationships develop, persist, or dissolve over time.

Second, the organizational culture measure demonstrated lower-than-recommended reliability and validity indicators. As a result, findings related to organizational culture, particularly its direct and moderating effects, should be interpreted with caution. Future research should utilize more comprehensive and psychometrically robust measures of organizational culture to verify these relationships.

Third, the Endurance of Toxic Professional Relationships (ETPR) construct was operationalized using a researcher-developed scale. Although the measure demonstrated strong internal consistency in the present sample, further validation across independent samples is necessary to establish its broader applicability and construct validity.

Fourth, all data were collected through self-report measures, creating the possibility of common method bias and social desirability effects. Future research may benefit from incorporating multiple data sources, such as peer, supervisor, or organizational assessments, to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of workplace relationships.

Finally, the sample consisted primarily of younger and highly educated respondents and included a substantial proportion of students. While this composition provided valuable perspectives, future studies should examine more diverse occupational groups, industries, and cultural contexts to enhance generalizability.

Future research may also explore additional factors that influence toxic relationship endurance. Potential moderators include leadership style, psychological safety, perceived organizational support, and power distance. Potential mediators include fear of professional consequences, relational dependency, and perceived career benefits. Examining these mechanisms would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of why employees remain in harmful professional relationships.

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