Unveiling the impact of abusive supervision on life satisfaction in Indian higher education: a trust-breaking phenomenon

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the linkages between abusive supervision, emotional exhaustion, and life satisfaction. In addition, we aim to investigate whether external social support moderates the effects of abusive supervision on life satisfaction. The sample of the study comprised 255 academic staff from the higher education institution of Jaipur Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire and collected in three waves. Hypotheses were tested with structural equation modelling to verify the proposed linkage in the study. We found that abusive supervision leads to emotional exhaustion that, in turn, negatively predicts life satisfaction. Furthermore, external social support attenuates the impacts of abusive supervision on life satisfaction. We contribute to the literature by demonstrating that sustained exposure to abusive supervision affects subordinates' life satisfaction indirectly through emotional exhaustion, and that the positive impacts of abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion on life satisfaction are weaker among individuals who are.

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1   Introduction

Leadership is a well investigated and thoroughly studied issue in management literature, generally defined as the process of influencing an organised group towards goal attainment (Jiang et al., 2017). Although leaders are often seen as representatives of their organisations, with the ability to greatly influence their subordinates (Jiang et al., 2017),

the darker side of leadership – which is marked by abusive behaviours and the misuse of power – is still not well studied in higher education.

In the current research, we focus on abusive supervisory style, which is a concept that has its roots in the corporate leadership literature but is now being studied in other domains as well. This supervisory style captures the aggressive, hostile and demeaning side of a leader in the academic context.

Faculty members face compounded challenges marked by increasing demands, translating into extended working hours and heightened stress levels. The negative consequences on their well-being, stemming from abusive supervision as highlighted by Skakon et al. (2010), are substantial. The well-being of these educators holds paramount importance for the success of academic institutions, given their pivotal role in delivering quality education and contributing to institutional growth. Consequently, the well-being of faculty members may experience adverse effects. Life satisfaction, encompassing physical and emotional health and success (Haybron and Haybron, 2008), serves as a crucial metric in assessing employee well-being. The empirical research landscape surprisingly neglects the impact of abusive supervision on employees' life satisfaction, despite prior studies underlining leaders' significant influence on their followers' well-being (Nielsen and Munir, 2009). Leaders, wielding control over critical aspects like rewards and performance evaluations, play a pivotal role in shaping the organisational work environment, profoundly impacting employees' overall well-being (Donaldson-Feilder et al., 2013). The current understanding of how leaders practicing abusive supervision influence their followers' life satisfaction remains limited (Erdogan et al., 2012). To bridge this gap, our study aims to explore the relationship between abusive supervision and employees' life satisfaction, anticipating a negative impact on well-being.

Moreover, our quest extends to reveal the intricate pathways through which abusive supervision influences life satisfaction. Additionally, we bring forth the notion of social support as a moderating influence, recognising its capacity to alleviate the adverse effects of abusive supervision on life satisfaction. This all-encompassing exploration aspires to furnish a comprehensive understanding of how the interplay of abusive leadership behaviours, guided by emotional exhaustion and tempered by social support, shapes employees' well-being and contentment with life.

2 Socio culture environment of Jaipur

Jaipur, India, is characterised by a high power distance culture, emphasising respect for authority and hierarchical social structures. The city embraces a collectivist ethos, prioritising strong family and community ties over individual pursuits. Culturally rich, Jaipur exhibits a balance between masculinity and femininity, valuing both assertiveness and cooperation. With a moderate uncertainty avoidance culture, the city acknowledges ambiguity while also appreciating established norms for stability. Understanding Jaipur through these Hofstede dimensions is crucial for interpreting the intricate associations between abusive supervision, emotional exhaustion, and life satisfaction in this unique cultural context.

3   Conceptualisation of abusive leadership in higher education

The issue of destructive leadership in higher education is a critical area that requires urgent attention from researchers. Destructive leadership can take many forms, such as bullying, manipulation, abuse of power, and micromanagement, and can have severe negative consequences on the well-being of faculty members. Such behaviours can lead to high levels of stress, decreased job satisfaction, and reduced productivity. Given the crucial role that faculty members play in higher education and their contribution to the development of students and society, it is vital to investigate the prevalence and impact of destructive leadership in academia. This would involve exploring the various forms of destructive leadership that occur in higher education and identifying effective strategies for preventing or addressing such behaviour. Such research would help to create a more positive and healthy work environment for faculty members, promoting their well-being and enhancing the quality of their work. Ultimately, it would contribute to improving the quality of education and training provided by higher education institutions (HEIs), leading to a more educated and productive society.

In the current research, we focus on abusive supervisory style, which is a concept that has its roots in the corporate leadership literature but is now being studied in other domains as well. This supervisory style captures the aggressive, hostile and demeaning side of a leader (or research supervisor in the academic context). Abusive supervision refers to "the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact" towards subordinates (Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervision is a harmful form of leadership behaviour that negatively impacts both employees and organisations (De Vries, 2018; Breevaart and Zacher, 2019; Kelemen et al., 2020). Such behaviour creates a hostile work environment, leading to decreased psychological well-being, physical health problems, counterproductive work behaviours, high turnover, emotional exhaustion, and poor performance among employees (Oh and Farh, 2017; Zhang and Liu, 2018). Abusive supervision also has significant financial consequences for companies, costing \$23.8 billion annually in absenteeism and legal expenses in the US alone (Tepper et al., 2007).

This issue is particularly concerning in academic settings, abusive research supervisors engage in behaviour that undermines the well-being of their faculty members, leading to decreased job satisfaction, job stress, and work-family conflict (Kearns interview by Smith, 2018; Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervision can also have a detrimental impact on the careers and reputations of faculty members through verbal abuse and public shaming from superiors (Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007).

4   Theory and hypotheses

This study is based on Hobfoll's (1989, p.516) conservation of resources (COR) theory, which proposes that individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and enhance their resources, including "objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies". The theory also posits that stressful circumstances can affect individuals and organisations, and people may respond in various ways (Westman et al., 2005).

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationships between abusive supervision, life satisfaction, and emotional exhaustion, as well as to investigate the moderating effect of social support on these connections. Specifically, the study aims to explore how abusive supervision can impact an individual's overall life satisfaction and level of emotional exhaustion, and how social support can influence these effects.

4.1 Abusive supervision and life satisfaction

Life satisfaction is a crucial aspect of an individual's overall well-being (Diener et al., 2010). While several studies have examined various factors that affect life satisfaction, the role of leadership behaviour, particularly abusive supervision, has been relatively unexplored (Wu et al., 2012). Abusive supervision is a toxic form of leadership behaviour characterised by rude, hostile, and aggressive treatment of subordinates which has been linked to numerous adverse outcomes, such as reduced job satisfaction (Wang et al., 2020), and increased turnover intentions.

The COR theory suggests that individuals aim to protect their resources when they face loss or the risk of loss (Hobfoll, 1989). Abusive supervision can be regarded as a workplace stressor that depletes employees' personal resources, leading to a reduction in life satisfaction (Wang et al., 2021). Employees who perceive abusive behaviour from their managers may feel belittled, unfairly treated, and hindered at work, resulting in negative impacts on work performance and the health and psychological well-being of employees (Arslan, 2019; Jiang et al., 2020). Additionally, Lian et al. (2012) found that employees' perceptions of abusive supervision were associated with decreased full-felt prosperity and low-quality relational trades. Furthermore, abusive supervision has been found to be negatively related to employees' life satisfaction. A negative work environment created by abusive supervision can reduce opportunities for positive social interactions, which can decrease employees' life satisfaction (Wang et al., 2021). Abused employees may be less likely to receive desirable support from their supervisors, making it more challenging for them to manage stressful situations at work (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Lyu et al., 2016). Furthermore, employees may use avoidance-coping strategies in response to abusive supervision, such as disengaging from work-related tasks, which can negatively affect their overall life satisfaction (Whitman et al., 2014).

Taken together, the research suggests that abusive supervision has a negative impact on employee life satisfaction, as it can lead to feelings of demean, disrespect, and undermined well-being in the workplace (Lyu et al., 2016).

H1 Life satisfaction of subordinates will suffer because of abusive supervision.

4.2 Emotional exhaustion as a mediator

The association of abusive supervision and life satisfaction can be better understood by examining the mediating role of emotional exhaustion, which is a key dimension of burnout (Gaines and Jermier, 1983).

Emotional exhaustion, a state of chronic emotional and physical fatigue resulting in disinterest towards one's job, has been identified by Daumiller et al. (2021) as a significant issue. The feeling of being psychologically fatigued due to accumulated stress from an individual's private life or occupational demands, or a mixture of both, is a common experience associated with emotional exhaustion (Lim et al., 2021). Emotional

exhaustion can lead to physical fatigue and have detrimental consequences on mental and physical health, relationships, and work performance (Söderlund, 2017).

Exploitative leaders often overburden their subordinates, give unrealistic deadlines, and exploit them, leading to a negative emotional state among employees (Schmid et al., 2019; Majeed and Fatima, 2020). Previous research has established that Machiavellian and abusive leadership enhance employee emotional exhaustion (Lim et al., 2021). Abusive supervision represents a loss of leadership support and exposure to abuse leads to emotional exhaustion as a result of depletion of a valued resource.

The relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion likely derives from the interpersonal conflict between the abused subordinate and the abusive supervisor, as well as the sustained attack on the subordinate's self-esteem and self-efficacy that is linked with abusive supervision (Harvey et al., 2007). Additionally, abused subordinates may experience stress as a result of being less likely to predict or control the abusive supervisor's behaviour, which can further contribute to emotional exhaustion (Wright and Hobfoll, 2004). Emotional exhaustion is a significant issue in higher education and a public health concern (Tlili et al., 2021). It can have severe consequences, including dropout, sleep disorders, depression, anxiety, compromised life satisfaction, and even suicide (Farrell et al., 2019; Pagnin et al., 2020).

Based on the conclusion that support from a supervisor might influence life satisfaction outside of the work domain (Newman et al., 2011), and the finding that emotional exhaustion mediates the link between abusive supervision and contextual performance (Aryee et al., 2008), this study posits that abusive supervision raises emotional exhaustion, further decreasing life satisfaction. Therefore, the following hypothesis was developed:

H2 Emotional exhaustion mediates the association between abusive supervision and life
    satisfaction.

4.3   Social support as a moderator

Research has shown that while supervisors are a critical factor in the workplace, they are not the only exchange partners that can impact an employee's experience (Chiaburu et al., 2013). Individuals who experience abusive supervision may not receive positive treatment from their supervisors, indicating the importance of social support in reducing chronic work stress (Tepper, 2000). Seeking support from family and friends and discussing job harassment situations with them can provide a different perspective, help identify behaviour patterns, understand emotions, and find possible solutions to stop being targeted by bullies (Björklund et al., 2019).

However, inadequate support from family and friends increases the risk of workplace bullying (Magee et al., 2014), while singles are more vulnerable to workplace bullying than those with a partner (Sahin et al., 2012). Support from family members can significantly contribute to reducing job burnout (Doolittle, 2020), and having more channels of social support can help individuals better cope with emotional exhaustion (Blanch and Aluja, 2012) and workplace bullying (Björklund et al., 2019).

According to COR theory, the principle that resource investment can aid stress resistance (Hobfoll, 2001) provides a sound basis for the buffering role of social support. Research also indicates that personal resources can help people deal better with stress-inducing and resource-depleting situations (De Clercq et al., 2018, 2019).

Empirical evidence suggests that personal resources can mitigate the deleterious effects of workplace stressors (Jahanzeb et al., 2019; Karatepe et al., 2019).Therefore, it is expected that social support would moderate the relationships between workplace stressor (abusive supervision) and emotional exhaustion (De Clercq et al., 2018; Rhee et al., 2017).

In keeping with these facts and the theoretical rationale, it is expected that social support would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion, ultimately affecting an individual's life satisfaction and workplace ostracism.

H3 Social support may buffer the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion such that individuals with high perceived social support are less likely to be exhausted emotionally in the presence of abusive supervision.

5   Sample and data collection

This study aimed to gather data on negative leadership practices in HEIs located in Jaipur city by surveying academic staff who had been teaching at their institution for at least five years. The goal was to capture the participants' experiences with negative leadership practices in their workplace. In this study, cross-sectional research design was adopted to collect data. The questionnaires were administered in person, and only those who voluntarily agreed to participate were included. To minimise common method variance, data were collected in three waves, with a 2-week lag between each wave. The initial distribution consisted of 460 questionnaires, but only those who completed the first survey were eligible for the second survey. Out of the total responses received, 260 (56%) were considered valid for analysis after careful review.

5.1   Measures

To minimise the likelihood of measurement errors, Luthans and Youssef (2007) recommend using established standardised scales to measure variables. In the present study, the scales utilised to assess all variables were adopted from previous studies and have previously demonstrated excellent alpha scores.

5.2   Abusive supervision

To measure perceived abusive supervision, a scale developed by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) and Tepper (2000) consisting of five items was used. Some of the items included "My supervisor ridicules me" and "My supervisor tells me that my thoughts and feelings are stupid." These items were selected as they were deemed more aligned with the purpose of the study and specifically reflected active abusive supervision.

5.3   Emotional exhaustion

To measure emotional exhaustion among employees, the researchers employed a nine-item scale created by Pines and Aronson (1988). Participants were asked to rate the frequency of their experiences using a five-point Likert scale, with one representing 'never' and five indicating 'very frequently'. Example items from this scale include "I

feel emotionally exhausted" and "I just can't go on any longer" (Pines and Aronson, 1988).

5.4 Life satisfaction

Researchers assessed participants' life satisfaction using a five-item measure adapted from Diener et al. (2013). The measure employed a five-point Likert scale to capture participants' perceptions of various aspects of their life satisfaction, such as how close their life is to their ideal and how satisfied they are with their life. For example, one of the items in the measure was "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal". Another item was "I am satisfied with my life"

5.5 Social support

In this study, social support was assessed using Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet and Farley, 1988). The MSPSS is a 12-item questionnaire that measures perceived social support from family, friends, and significant others. Each subscale comprises four items, and responses are provided on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree).

5.6 Control variable

To account for the potential influence of demographic factors on the relationship between a supervisor and subordinate, the current study followed the approach of prior research (Shamir, 2011) by controlling for such variables. Consistent with previous studies (Tepper et al., 2004; Zhao et al., 2013), the study measured experience as continuous variables in years, whereas gender was represented using a binary variable with a value of 1 indicating female and a value of 2 indicating male.

6   Statistical analysis

6.1 Data normality

The normality of the dataset was assessed by examining the skewness and kurtosis of the data, but according to Tabachnick and Fidell (2013), when the sample size is larger than 200, slight deviations from normality may not have a significant impact on the research findings. Multicollinearity was evaluated using the variance inflation factor (VIF) test, which revealed that there was no significant correlation issue among the independent variables as the VIF values ranged from 1.96 to 2.27, indicating that the data was free from multicollinearity. Another approach to assess multicollinearity is by checking the z-scores of skewness and kurtosis, as proposed by Orcan (2020). A z-score of less than 1.96 indicates that the data is normal and has no multicollinearity. Thus, the data used in this study was deemed normal and did not have any multicollinearity issues.

   This study noted that 67.50% of the respondents were male, whereas 32.55% of respondents were female. Based on age groups, 72.28 % of respondents were between the age bracket of 30 to 40 years, 17.7% were between 41 to 50 years, 4.20 % were between below 30 years and 6.72% were above 50 years of age. Furthermore, 82.28% having

experience of between 5 to 10 years 10.15% having between 10 to 15 years, 3.60% having experience between 15 to 20 years while 3.97%having experience of more than 20 years. To evaluate the internal consistency of the constructs, the researcher computed Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The values obtained for the constructs (Table 2) were higher than the recommended threshold of 0.6, indicating satisfactory internal reliability (Hair et al., 2010).

Table 1 Matrix of correlation coefficients, normality and multicollinearity

Constructs	Mean	S.D	Sk	Ku	1	2	3	4	VIF
AS	2.03	1.017	0.91	0.37					
EE	2.39	1.120	0.90	0.51	0.754**	1			1.96
LS	2.67	1.287	0.81	0.91	–0.508	–0.660**	1		2.01
SS	4.29	0.630	0.63	0.29	–0.427**	–0.329**	0.561**	1	2.27

Note: **$p < 0.01$.

Furthermore convergent and discriminant validity of the scales used in the study, the average variance extracted (AVE) was examined, with a threshold of 0.50 indicating acceptable convergent validity. Additionally, the composite reliability (CR) values were compared to the AVE values, with a requirement that CR should be higher than AVE to demonstrate discriminant validity. The results, as presented in Table 2, indicate the presence of both convergent and discriminant validity for the scales used in the study.

Table 2 Reliability and validity analysis

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
AS	0.953	0.964	0.844
EE	0.94	0.954	0.807
LS	0.905	0.893	0.632
SS	0.922	0.934	0.548

6.2 Hypotheses testing

In the present study, the researcher employed structural equation modelling to assess the validity of the formulated hypotheses. To test the mediation hypothesis, the researcher utilised the bootstrap methodology with a 95% confidence intervals to examine the entire structural model The bootstrap method has been demonstrated to be a reliable approach for generating confidence intervals for indirect effects in a variety of situations, as noted in prior research (MacKinnon et al., 2007; Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

Results indicated that employees' perception of abusive supervision does not have any significant influence on life satisfaction of subordinates (b = 0.30, p = 0.076, t = 0.761), rejecting the first hypothesis. Additionally, this study examined the mediating role of emotional exhaustion between abusive supervision and life satisfaction. The direct effect of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion was significant (b = 0.35, p = 0.002, t = 2.798), and emotional exhaustion negatively predicted life satisfaction (b = –0.47, p = 0.000, t = 6.031). Multiplying these coefficients (0.35 * –0.47) showed a significant indirect effect of abusive supervision on life satisfaction through emotional
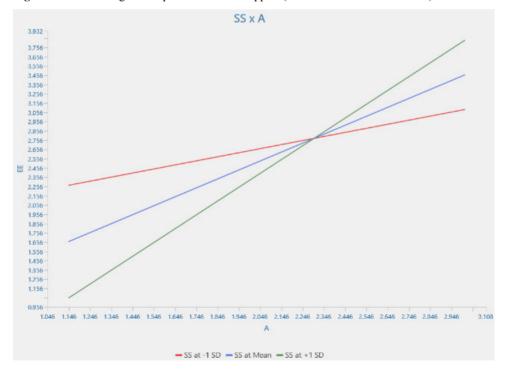
exhaustion (b = –0.16, p = 0.000, t = 3.878), with no zero value between the upper and lower limits (LLCI = 0.087, ULCI = 0.136), thus confirming the second hypothesis.

Table 3   Results of structural model

Relationships	β	CR	SE	Boot strap @95% –LLCI	UPCI
AS→LS	0.27	–5.181	0.055		
AS-→EE	0.39**	2.798	0.117		
EE→LS	–0.47**	–3.450	0.099		
PSS-→EE	–0.37**	–6.031	0.059		
Mediation of EE					
Direct effect	0.27	–5.181	0.055	0.087	0.136
Indirect effect	0.33*	–3.878	0.089	0.127	0.196
Moderation role of SS					
AS*PSS	0.22*	2.685	0.053	0.096	0.188

Note: **p < 0.01; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval, ULCI = upper limit confidence
    interval.

Figure 1   Moderating role of perceived social support (see online version for colours)

An interaction term between abusive supervision and perceived external social support was calculated to investigate the moderating role of perceived social support on the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion. The analysis revealed a significant effect of the interaction term on emotional exhaustion (b = –0.22,

p = 0.002, t = 2.685), with upper and lower boundaries indicating the absence of a zero value (LLCI = 0.096, ULCI = 0.188), confirming the moderating influence of perceived social support. Further analysis using slopes (Figure 1) was conducted to explore the impact of high and low perceived external social support. Further examination of the role of high and low perceived external social support was conducted through slopes (Figure 1). The results indicated that individuals with high perceived social support are less likely to feel emotionally exhausted when facing abusive supervisors, whereas those with low external social support are more likely to feel more emotional exhausted in the same situation. These findings support the third hypothesis of the study.

7   Discussion and conclusions

Prominent studies have shown a positive association between abusive supervision and interpersonal deviance, such as the studies by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) and Lian et al. (2012). But the result of our second hypothesis, i.e., the impact of abusive supervision on an employee's life satisfaction is not consistent with previous studies (H1 rejected). One possible reason is the meaningfulness and purpose of the work itself, such as in the case of teaching, which may undermine the effects of abusive supervision.

Negative supervisory behaviour, such as abusive supervision, can increase employee stress levels and deplete their personal resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Due to organisational hierarchy, employees often cannot react towards negative supervisors (Wang et al., 2020), leading to emotional exhaustion. In countries with high power distance, higher-ranked employees may abuse their authority to mistreat their subordinates (Khalid et al., 2018) further contributing to emotional exhaustion and ultimately lowering life satisfaction.

However, perceived external social support can act as a buffer against the adverse consequences of work stressors (Lim and Lee, 2011). Perceived social support has been recognised as a crucial social resource for coping with stressful life events and is widely regarded as a protective factor against physical and mental health issues that may arise as a result of experiencing negative life events (Kaniasty, 2012; Prati and Pietrantoni, 2010). Supportive relationships with family members and friends can counteract the negative effects of abusive supervision by providing emotional support, validation, and a sense of belonging. By getting emotional support, practical support, motivation, and perspective, social support can help individuals navigate difficult situations and build resilience in the face of adversity. Accordingly, this study noted that individuals with high external social support have greater ability to control stressful workplace environments created by abusive supervision (H3 accepted).

8   Implications

The research reveals crucial insights into supervisory abuse, emphasising its profound impact on organisational dynamics, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors (Miminoshvili and Černe, 2021). Employees experiencing abusive supervision encounter heightened emotional exhaustion and workplace ostracism, diminishing overall life satisfaction. This aligns with existing research on the isolating effects of abusive leadership. The study significantly contributes to theoretical models linking abusive

behaviour to employee well-being, exploring emotional exhaustion, life satisfaction, and workplace ostracism. It also highlights the moderating role of social support, enriching our understanding of leadership's impact on employee well-being.

Addressing abusive behaviour in universities requires a multifaceted strategy. Leveraging technology for proactive monitoring, mentorship programs, and fostering an inclusive culture are crucial. Clear lines of responsibility, feedback mechanisms, and performance evaluations enhance accountability. Restorative justice practices, coupled with prioritising employee well-being through wellness programs, serve as preventative measures, contributing to a positive workplace culture. In essence, a comprehensive approach is essential for combating and preventing abusive behaviours within academic institutions, fostering a healthy and supportive work environment.

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