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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The Dark Side of Leadership: Unravelling the Effects of Toxic Leadership on Organizational Performance in Pakistan's Public Sector

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Abstract: This study examines the detrimental impact of toxic leadership on organizational performance in Pakistan's public sector. Drawing on upper echelon theory as a theoretical foundation this study uses a quantitative approach. This study uses a covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) on data from 392 public sector employees across Punjab province, this research investigates the direct and indirect (via strategic quality management) relationship between toxic leadership and organizational performance. This study has explored the moderating effect of organizational citizenship behavior between the relationship of toxic leadership and strategic quality management. The findings reveal that toxic leadership undermines organizational performance through the degradation of strategic quality management systems. Moreover, OCB buffers the negative effect of toxic leadership on strategic quality management. These results are consistent with the current literature that employee resilience in hostile institutional environments offer critical insights for public sector reform in developing economies.

Keywords: Toxic Leadership, Strategic Quality Management, Organizational Performance, Organizational Citizenship Behavior, Upper Echelon Theory, Public Sector, Pakistan

Introduction

Leadership continues to be a fundamental factor to organizational effectiveness that influences strategic direction, creates organizational culture, and drives performance within sectors. Although the positive aspects of leadership have been studied extensively (Agazu et al., 2025; Zhu et al., 2025; Kyambade & Namatovu, 2025) however, the dark side of leadership has recently gained more interest (Bueno-de la Fuente et al., 2025; Higgs et al., 2026) and is a field that is still considered relatively underdeveloped in management theory. Burns (2017), Pelletier (2010) and Schmidt (2008) describe toxic leadership as the repeated use of self-serving, manipulative, and psychologically abusive tactics that involve leaders making decisions that are more focused on the leaders' personal interests than the welfare of their organizations, using fear, coercion, or intimidation to gain control. Whereas ineffective leadership has a negative effect, toxic leadership is systematic and leads to reduced employee well-being and organizational functioning.

The theoretical relevance of toxic leadership goes beyond being harmful implications for organizational outcomes. That is, leaders' personal traits influence organizational outcomes, given the inherent complexity and the limits of managerial cognition in strategic decision-making (Akinyele & Chen, 2025; Anastasiou, 2025). Organizational strategy and output are linked to the cognitive values, behavioral tendencies, and decision-making orientations of executives based on the upper echelon theory (UET) (Hambrick & Mason,

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1984; Hambrick, 2007). If executives are narcissistic, authoritarian, and self-serving, these negative characteristics of leadership settle into the organization's strategy, leading to dysfunction. Recent research has focused on the impact of the characteristics of the person on strategic management (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Zhu & Chen, 2015), but relatively few studies have tested the impact of destructive leadership behaviors on strategic management processes. This study builds on UET by exploring toxic leadership as a behavioral mechanism that impacts strategic quality management (SQM) and organizational performance.

However, such dynamics are pronounced in the public sector of developing countries where institutional settings often offer poor checks on destructive leadership. Public bureaucracies rarely have accountability mechanisms, political appointments, or supervision (Andrews et al., 2017). Provincial government departments in Pakistan are a typical scenario of non-democratic institutional environment where high-ranking officials have a lot of power and job security with little accountability for interpersonal behaviors. These institutional structures enable the toxic style of leadership to continue through administrations and establish long-term dysfunction in the organization.

Poor enforcement of formal rules, weak professional norms, and patronage-based governance create spaces that allow formal rules to co-exist with weak enforcement (Yang, 2026; Kim & Kang, 2026). In such institutional voids, bad leadership abounds, using organizational structures to silence dissent, deflect accountability, and cement power in the hands of the leader. As a result, the three pressures (coercive, normative, and mimetic) that usually deter destructive kinds of leadership are reduced and toxic leadership behaviours become more normal in public institutions.

One of the most important mechanisms that toxic leadership effects on organization is strategic quality management (SQM). The quality aspects are taken into account in the strategic planning, organizational process, resource allocation, and performance evaluation of the organization (Priede, 2012; Sui Pheng & Hui Hong, 2005; Oakland, 2014). The key to effective SQM is the empowerment of employees, open communication, cross-functional teamwork, continuous improvement and evidence-based decision making. Toxic leaders, however, destroy these conditions by being authoritarian and erratic, by promoting themselves more than the organization, and by degrading organizational quality systems.

SQM is an organizational capability that helps firms integrate knowledge, adapt to the changes in the environment and maintain their competitive performance (Teece, 2007; Zahra & George, 2002). Toxic leadership undermines these capabilities through a variety of ways, including the disruption of the collaborative routines, diminished quality feedback, the discouragement of participative decision making, and the substitution of quality improvement with symbolic compliance (Mergen & Ozbilgin, 2021). This degradation has a negative impact on operational performance, as well as strategic flexibility and organizational performance.

Although these relationships are conceptually relevant, there is a limited number of empirical studies that are combined between toxic leadership, SQM and organization performance. Previous research has mainly focused on the relationship between toxic leadership and the outcomes of employees (Tepper, 2000) or the effects of SQM on organizational performance (Alzoubi et al., 2022). The relation of these streams to one another on a strategic basis is not fully understood. For this reason, the purpose of this study is to direct attention to the central mediating mechanism by which toxic leadership is linked to reduced performance of the organization, thereby extending the concept of the upper echelon theory and enriching the literature on destructive leadership in public-sector organizations.

Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is the moderating influence in the toxic leadership--strategic quality management--performance relationship because it is the individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and in the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of the organization (Iqbal & Piwovar, 2023; Lee et al., 2024). Within the public sector,

OCB manifests as voluntary extra-role behaviors that support the social and psychological environment in which task performance occurs, including helping coworkers, civic virtue, sportsmanship, courtesy, and conscientiousness that contribute to organizational functioning beyond formal job requirements (Organ, 1988; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997). While OCB has received significant attention in terms of its antecedents to organizational performance (Podsakoff et al., 2000; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997; Organ et al., 2005) and links between leadership and organizational outcomes (Ismail et al., 2023; Raziq et al., 2025), its role as a buffer to the negative effects of toxic leadership is theoretically under-researched. This study proposes that OCB reduces the negative impact of the toxic leadership. OCB in practice leads to voluntary helping behaviors, civic engagement, and constructive involvement that maintain organizational functioning even under destructive leadership. Similarly, OCB builds trust and supportive relationships among employees that serve as social resources which serve to restrict the ability of toxic leaders to damage organizational systems (Organ, 1988).

Current literature provides no empirical evidence that investigates whether OCB acts as a moderating factor between the toxic leadership and SQM. Existing studies have largely focused on the buffering effect of OCB on employee outcomes (Podsakoff et al., 2000; Organ & Ryan, 1995), organizational commitment (Organ et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2014), and performance relationships (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997; Podsakoff et al., 2000), with minimal research on its buffering effect on strategic management systems in the developing-country public sector that can be detrimental to organizational leadership.

In this regard, this study fills four major research gaps. First, upper echelon theory (UET) has made significant advances in strategic management research, but it remains poorly accepted due to the black box problem of depending on demographic proxies yet ignoring behavioral mechanisms that link the actions of executives with organizational outcomes (Lawrence, 1997; Neely et al., 2020). This study continues UET by conceptualizing toxic leadership as a type of organizational behavioral pathology, which affects organizational performance through SQM. Second, although toxic leadership impacts individual-level outcomes are well documented (Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Mackey et al., 2017), the mechanisms by which toxic leadership travels to the organizational level are not clearly understood. Thirdly, OCB has been scarcely studied as an institutional protection against negative consequences of toxic leadership on strategic management capabilities. Lastly, the majority of the literature on toxic leadership, SQM and OCB has been developed in private sector environments in the West, which has limited the use of results in public sector settings in developing countries.

This study is based on UET, which proposes the model that toxic leadership affects organizational performance through the mediating role of SQM and OCB moderates the toxic leadership-SQM relationship. The study extends cross-culturally the validity of UET, as it provides empirical evidence for Pakistan's public sector, clarifies the behavioral mechanisms behind the relationship of leadership pathology to organizational performance, and helps in the understanding of OCB as an institutional governance mechanism in adverse organizational environments. The rest of the paper summarizes literature and theories, shows methodology and empirical results, and finally provides theoretical, practical, and future research implications.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

Upper Echelon Theory

This study is grounded in the theory of upper echelon theory (Hambrick and Mason 1984; Hambrick 2007). The theory assumes that organizational outcomes, such as strategic decisions and the level of performance, represent the values, orientations to thinking, and actions of the highest-ranking executives. Strategic decisions cannot be decided simply by logic, so they are always filtered by the interpretative frameworks of the senior leaders. In later studies, these cognitive and psychological factors have also been added as direct factors which shape organizational strategy and performance, such as personality (Finkelstein et al., 2009), emotional disposition (Zhu & Chen, 2015), and the tendency to behave in ways that are characteristic of leadership (Zhu & Chen, 2015).

The context of this study, the relationship between toxic leadership and performance is an intriguing phenomenon that has been explained using UET. Toxic leaders, defined as people with a narcissistic, authoritarian, abusive leadership style, who are unpredictable, and have cognitive frames and behavioral tendencies that systematically alter the strategic management environment in a way that is harmful. Their destructive attitudes and poor decision-making turn organizational processes and processes into a web of dysfunctions, erode psychological safety and break collaborative routines of quality management. The theory suggests that if toxic leadership is present at the highest levels, it will deteriorate the strategic quality management systems and will ultimately have a negative impact on organizational effectiveness.

Toxic Leadership and Strategic Quality Management

Toxic leadership is a common pattern of destructive, self-serving behavior that adversely affects not only organizational performance, but also the well-being of organizational members (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Einarsen et al., 2007). Schmidt (2008) lists five essential components: abusive supervision (public humiliation, verbal abuse); authoritarian leadership (rigid control, suppression of dissent); narcissism (inflated self-importance, disregard for others); unpredictability (erratic mood swings, inconsistent decisions); and self-promotion (credit-stealing, grandstanding). Combined these behaviours give rise to climates of fear, distrust and disengagement in the organisation, which cannot coexist with the cooperative and improvement culture essential for effective quality management.

Strategic quality management (SQM) is not only an operational quality tool, it also involves implementing quality principles into strategic planning, leadership commitment, resource allocation, and performance assessment (Sui Pheng & Hui Hong, 2005; Oakland, 2014). Open communication, empowering employees, regular feedback, and cross-functional collaboration are essential at SQM, and these are features that toxic leaders manifestly kill off. Toxic leaders undermine the psychological safety and inspirational foundation which is the basis of SQM by engaging in destructive behaviors. Workers are no longer motivated to spot quality problems, less inclined to engage in ongoing improvement efforts, and less adept at working together across departmental lines.

In the UET view, toxic leaders' cognitive aberrations and dysfunctional behavior directly affect the strategic quality management environment. Their narcissistic entitlement drives them to ignore quality feedback which challenges their self-image; their authoritarianism undermines participative decision making needed to drive quality improvements; their unpredictability creates inconsistent performance, which cannot be managed systematically; and self-promotion takes organizational energy away from achieving quality results. The relationships indicated in these mechanisms suggest direct negative relationships between toxic leadership and effectiveness of SQM.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): *Toxic leadership has a significant negative effect on strategic quality management.*

Strategic Quality Management and Organizational Performance

The strategic quality of leadership and strategic architecture convert to organizational outcomes via strategic quality management. If implemented effectively, SQM brings about systematic improvements in service delivery efficiency, customer focus, resource use and adaptive capacity which in turn has a direct impact on the performance of the organisation (Priede, 2012). In the context of the public sector, SQM helps to enhance consistency in the implementation of policies, transparency, innovation in service provision and citizen trust, which are all critical aspects of public sector organizational performance.

This study uses the lens of UET, that SQM as an organizational capability that integrates human, procedural and informational resources into a system of value creation. SQM is a dynamic capability, that is, it gives organizations the ability to sense, respond and adapt to internal and external demands in quality-driven processes (Zahra & George, 2002). In this situation, SQM becomes part of the organization's strategic

architecture, and it acts as a mediator between the leadership and the strategic inputs and the performance outcomes, turning abstract strategic visions into concrete operational improvements.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): *Strategic quality management has a significant positive effect on organizational performance.*

The Mediating Role of Strategic Quality Management

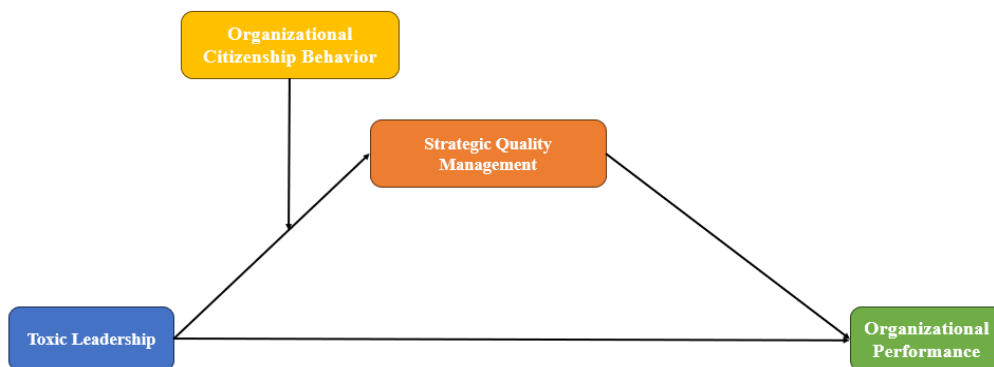
The theoretical logic presented above implies that toxic leadership affects organizational performance in two ways: direct and indirect, the latter via its effect on the quality of systems for strategic management. According to UET, the negative cognitive and behavioral scripts of poisonous leaders are transmitted through organizations; SQM is a key medium for this transmission. When toxic leadership erodes the collaborative routines, feedback loops and quality-oriented cultures that support SQM, SQM in turn suffers, which impacts on the performance of the organization.

This mediating role is consistent with theory suggesting that leadership influences performance is significantly mediated by strategic management processes. Bhatia and Awasthi (2018) showed that the quality management practices had a mediating effect in performance context and the present study extends this concept to the toxic leadership context. Previous study is consistent with the fact that toxic leadership also has a direct impact on performance through other factors, such as turnover, absenteeism and sabotage of operational processes.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): *Strategic quality management mediates the relationship between toxic leadership and organizational performance.*

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



The Moderating Role of Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is the individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of the organization (Organ, 1988; Smith et al., 1983). In the public sector sphere, OCB manifests as voluntary extra-role behaviors including altruism, courtesy, conscientiousness, sportsmanship, and civic virtue that support the social and psychological environment in which task performance occurs, contributing to organizational effectiveness beyond formal job requirements (Organ, 1988; Podsakoff et al., 2000).

Traditional OCB theory frames these practices as individual behaviors that improve organizational functioning, group cohesion, and operational resiliency. Based on the perspective of Social Exchange Theory, employees who engage in OCB form positive relationships with coworkers and supervisors, which opens the way for good management practices (Organ, 1988; Organ & Ryan, 1995). In toxic leadership settings, strong

OCB frameworks may, in theory, help to maintain quality control processes by providing social support, voluntary cooperation, and constructive engagement that limit the destructive potential of toxic leadership.

In the literature, OCB and quality management have been integrated. The two frameworks have core values of cooperative behavior, integrity, customer focus, continual improvement, and long-term thinking (Organ, 1988; Podsakoff et al., 2000). The positive externalities of OCB activities contribute to the improvement of an organization's reputation, innovation and stakeholder engagement, which are all key aspects in the implementation of SQM (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997). Employees who embed OCB in their work behavior embed a culture where the focus is on quality, cooperation and social responsibility, which allows for the effective implementation of SQM practices.

OCB is a social buffer that helps diminish the negative impact of toxic leadership on SQM through four mechanisms: (1) voluntary helping behaviors and civic virtue create informal accountability and peer support that limit the discretion of toxic leaders in their exercise of power; (2) OCB engages employees as stakeholders that can identify and challenge toxic leadership behaviors that damage SQM; (3) OCB establishes an organizational ethical infrastructure through sportsmanship and courtesy to resist the normalization of toxic behaviors; and (4) OCB introduces social resources that offer employees peer support to maintain SQM despite toxic leadership behaviors.

This buffering effect is consistent with recent studies on the buffering effect of organizational citizenship mechanisms in unfavorable organizational settings. The Pakistani public sector environment is one that is bureaucratic, beset by political patronage, and lacks formal accountability systems, thus making OCB a potentially important social resource that helps to reduce the harm caused by "bad apples" in the public sector strategic QM systems.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): *Organizational citizenship behavior moderates the relationship between toxic leadership and strategic quality management, such that the negative effect is weaker at higher levels of OCB.*

Methodology

Research Design and Sample

The study has a quantitative and cross-sectional survey design which is used to test the hypothesized relationships. The target population consists of the employees of the various administrative departments of public sector organizations in Punjab province of Pakistan such as health, education, finance, planning, and infrastructure. Stratified random sampling was used to provide representation of important sub-groups of the public sector population, based on job hierarchy (managerial versus non-managerial) and geographic location (federal versus provincial offices).

The sample size was calculated to be 400 based on the criterion that there must be a minimum of 10 cases for each indicator variable in the Structural Equation Modeling (Hair et al., 2021). The 500 questionnaires were distributed, and of those who returned 392 (78.4%) questionnaires were useable after data cleaning. The sample composition represents the demographic profile of the senior public service in Pakistan and the mean organizational tenure of the sample was 12.4 years while 98.2 % were male.

Measurement of variables

The assessment of the organizational performance was based on the 6-item scale adapted from Etzioni (1964) and validated by Camps & Luna-Arocas (2012), which had responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from much less to much more. The organizational citizenship behavior was assessed using the Lee and Allen (2002) 8-item scale, which was rated on a 5 points Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The toxic leadership was analyzed with the 15-item scale created by Yavaş (2016) also with a 5-point Likert scale. Lastly, strategic quality management was assessed with a 6-item scale from Bolatan et al. (2022) with

scale items emphasizing feedback of quality information to employees/managers, which was also measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Analysis and Results

The statistical analysis results are presented in this part to test the hypotheses of this study. The analysis performed in this research includes four stages: (1) Demographic Profile of the respondents, (2) Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) analysis to check the measurement model, (3) Structural Model analysis to check the structural model, and (4) Hypothesis test including mediation and moderation analysis.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 392 usable responses were obtained. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample, including gender, age, education, income, marital status, and work experience.

Table 1
Demographics of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	109	27.8
	Female	282	71.9
	Prefer not to say	1	0.3
Age (years)	25–35	6	1.5
	36–45	94	24.0
	46–55	236	60.2
	56–60	56	14.3
Education	Bachelor	5	1.3
	Masters	102	26.0
	MPhil	225	57.4
	PhD	60	15.3
Monthly Income (PKR)	50,000–100,000	57	14.5
	100,001–150,000	129	32.9
	150,001–200,000	82	20.9
	200,001–250,000	72	18.4
	250,001 and above	52	13.3
Marital Status	Married	236	60.2
	Unmarried	156	39.8
Work Experience	1–5 years	150	38.3
	6–10 years	82	20.9
	11–15 years	66	16.8
	16–20 years	63	16.1
	Above 20 years	31	7.9
Total		392	100.0

The sample was predominantly male (71.9%), with the majority of respondents aged between 46 and 55 years (60.2%). Most respondents held an MPhil degree (57.4%), earned between PKR 100,001–150,000 monthly (32.9%), and were married (60.2%). Respondents were fairly distributed across the work-experience categories, with the largest group (38.3%) in the 1-5 years band.

Measurement Model Assessment (Confirmatory Factor Analysis)

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using the maximum likelihood robust (MLR) estimator with 95% confidence intervals to assess the measurement model prior to structural model testing. The model comprised four latent factors — toxic leadership (TL), strategic quality management (SQM), organizational performance (OP), and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) — represented by 35 observed indicators (n = 392).

Table 2

Measurement Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Adequate Threshold	Good Threshold
χ^2 (robust)	713.087	—	—
df	554	—	—
CFI (robust)	0.985	0.900	0.950
TLI (robust)	0.984	0.900	0.950
RMSEA (robust)	0.027	0.080	0.060
RMSEA 90% CI upper	0.040	0.080	0.060
SRMR	0.031	0.080	0.060
PCLOSE	1.000	0.050	0.100

All fit indices met the criteria for good fit (CFI = 0.985, TLI = 0.984, RMSEA = 0.027, SRMR = 0.031, PCLOSE = 1.000), indicating that the hypothesized four-factor measurement model fit the observed data well and could be retained for structural analysis.

Table 3

Standardized Factor Loadings

Factor	Item	Std. Estimate	SE	p-value
OCB	OCB1	1.000	0.789	N/A
OCB	OCB2	0.776	0.063	<0.001
OCB	OCB3	0.803	0.061	<0.001
OCB	OCB4	0.782	0.061	<0.001
OCB	OCB5	0.805	0.060	<0.001
OCB	OCB6	0.781	0.060	<0.001
OCB	OCB7	0.796	0.062	<0.001
OCB	OCB8	0.780	0.061	<0.001
OP	OP1	0.809	0.000	N/A
OP	OP2	0.840	0.054	<0.001
OP	OP3	0.851	0.055	<0.001
OP	OP4	0.823	0.053	<0.001
OP	OP5	0.864	0.053	<0.001
OP	OP6	0.849	0.053	<0.001
SQM	SQM1	0.768	0.000	N/A
SQM	SQM2	0.783	0.066	<0.001
SQM	SQM3	0.817	0.063	<0.001
SQM	SQM4	0.785	0.059	<0.001
SQM	SQM5	0.849	0.046	<0.001
SQM	SQM6	0.902	0.047	<0.001
TL	TL1	0.817	0.000	N/A
TL	TL2	0.777	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL3	0.789	0.055	<0.001
TL	TL4	0.792	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL5	0.797	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL6	0.766	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL7	0.779	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL8	0.808	0.053	<0.001
TL	TL9	0.778	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL10	0.806	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL11	0.772	0.053	<0.001
TL	TL12	0.798	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL13	0.766	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL14	0.807	0.054	<0.001
TL	TL15	0.785	0.052	<0.001

Standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.766 to 0.902, all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and statistically significant at $p < .001$, confirming that each indicator loaded strongly on its intended construct.

Table 4

Reliability and Convergent Validity

Factor	Composite Reliability (ρ_c)	AVE
OCB	0.930	0.623
OP	0.935	0.705
SQM	0.924	0.670
TL	0.961	0.623

All four constructs achieved composite reliability (ρ_c) above the 0.70 threshold and average variance extracted (AVE) above 0.50, confirming adequate internal consistency reliability and convergent validity for all constructs.

Table 5

Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Factor	OCB	OP	SQM	TL
OCB	0.789	0.710	0.685	-0.581
OP	0.658	0.840	0.709	-0.533
SQM	0.628	0.656	0.819	-0.558
TL	-0.511	-0.458	-0.486	0.789

Note: The diagonal (bold) shows the square root of AVE for each factor; the lower triangle shows inter-factor correlations; the upper triangle shows the 95% confidence interval limit for each correlation.

For all four constructs, the square root of AVE exceeded the construct's correlations with all other constructs, satisfying the Fornell–Larcker criterion and confirming discriminant validity.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 6

Bivariate Correlations

Variable	OCB	OP	SQM	TL
OCB	1			
OP	0.699***	1		
SQM	0.670***	0.696***	1	
TL	-0.538***	-0.482***	-0.512***	1

*** $p < .001$. Values reported are standardized latent factor scores.

As expected, TL was negatively correlated with SQM, OP, and OCB, while SQM, OP, and OCB were positively correlated with one another, providing preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships.

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was estimated using the MLR estimator with latent variable (factor) scores, testing four structural paths and one interaction term ($TL \times OCB$) predicting SQM, in line with H1, H2, and H4. Mediation of the TL–OP relationship through SQM (H3) was tested using bootstrapped indirect effects.

Table 7

Structural Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Adequate Threshold	Good Threshold
χ^2 (robust)	81.211	—	—
df	2	—	—
CFI (robust)	0.904	0.900	0.950
TLI (robust)	0.615	0.900	0.950
RMSEA (robust)	0.318	0.080	0.060
RMSEA 90% CI upper	0.371	0.080	0.060
SRMR	0.062	0.080	0.060
PCLOSE	0.000	0.050	0.100

The structural model's CFI (0.904) and SRMR (0.062) met adequate thresholds; however, TLI, RMSEA, and PCLOSE fell below adequate cutoffs. This pattern is common in low-df structural (score/LVS) models and is noted here as a limitation — path estimates below should be interpreted with appropriate caution alongside the strong measurement model fit reported in Table 2.

Table 8

Structural Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Path	Est.	Std. Est.	SE	95% CI	p	Hypothesis	Decision
TL → SQM	-0.289	-0.290	0.057	-0.401 to -0.177	<0.001	H1	Supported
SQM → OP	0.660	0.610	0.038	0.584 to 0.735	<0.001	H2	Supported
TL → OP (direct)	-0.183	-0.170	0.042	-0.266 to -0.100	<0.001	H3 (direct)	Significant
OCB → SQM (main effect)	0.474	0.477	0.058	0.359 to 0.588	<0.001	—	n/a
TL × OCB → SQM	0.134	0.115	0.056	0.024 to 0.243	0.017	H4	Supported

TL exerted a significant negative effect on SQM ($\beta = -0.290$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. SQM exerted a significant positive effect on OP ($\beta = 0.610$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = 0.756$, a very large effect), supporting H2. The TL × OCB interaction term significantly predicted SQM ($\beta = 0.115$, $p = .017$), supporting H4. Collinearity diagnostics were acceptable across all structural paths (maximum VIF = 2.21, mean VIF = 1.77), indicating multicollinearity was not a concern.

Mediation Analysis (H3)

H3 proposed that SQM mediates the relationship between TL and OP. The specific indirect effect of TL on OP through SQM was examined using bootstrapped confidence intervals.

Table 9

Indirect, Direct, and Total Effects of TL on OP via SQM

Effect	Est.	Std. Est.	SE	95% CI	p
Indirect: TL → SQM → OP	-0.191	-0.177	0.039	-0.267 to -0.114	<0.001
Direct: TL → OP	-0.183	-0.170	0.042	-0.266 to -0.100	<0.001
Total effect: TL → OP	-0.373	-0.347	0.053	-0.478 to -0.269	<0.001

The indirect effect of TL on OP through SQM was negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.177$, 95% CI [-0.267, -0.114], $p < .001$). Because the direct effect of TL on OP also remained significant ($\beta = -0.170$, $p < .001$), SQM partially mediates the relationship between TL and OP. H3 is supported.

Moderation Analysis (H4)

H4 proposed that OCB moderates the relationship between TL and SQM, such that the negative effect of TL on SQM is weaker at higher levels of OCB. The interaction term TL $\times$ OCB was a significant predictor of SQM ($\beta = 0.115$, $p = .017$), and simple slopes were probed at -1 SD, the mean, and +1 SD of OCB.

Table 10

Conditional Effects of TL on SQM at Values of OCB

Level of OCB	Simple Slope	p-value
-1 SD	-0.422	<0.001
Mean	-0.289	<0.001
+1 SD	-0.155	<0.001

The negative effect of TL on SQM was strongest at low levels of OCB ($b = -0.422$) and progressively weaker at mean ($b = -0.289$) and high levels of OCB ($b = -0.155$), indicating that OCB buffers the harmful effect of toxic leadership on strategic quality management. A Johnson–Neyman analysis confirmed the conditional effect of TL on SQM was statistically significant across OCB values from -2.031 SD to 1.261 SD. This pattern is consistent with H4, which is supported.

Figure 2

Interaction Plot: Color key: -1 SD: slope=-0.422, $p<0.001$, Mean: slope=-0.289, $p<0.001$, +1 SD: slope=-0.155, $p<0.001$

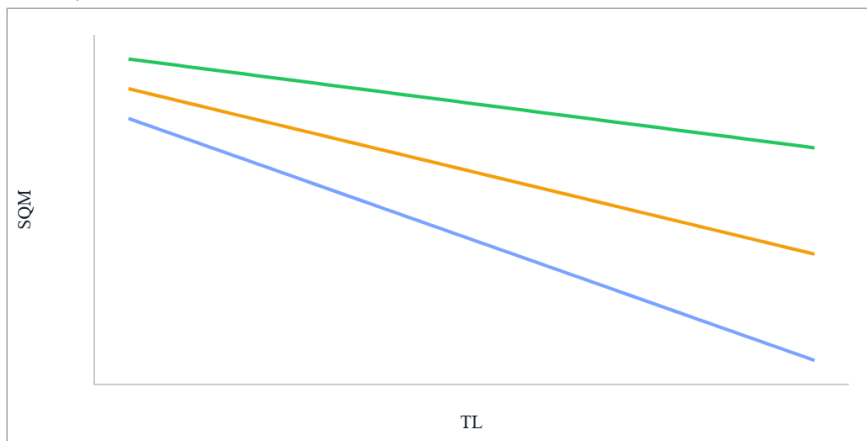
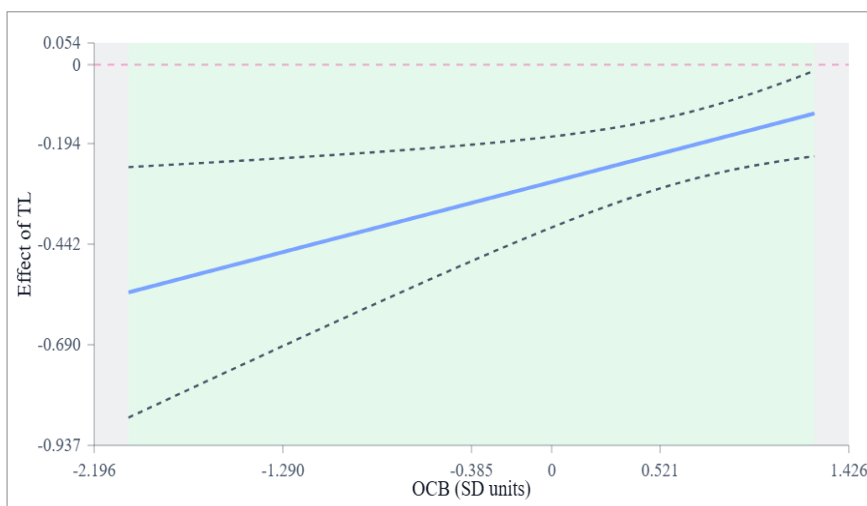


Figure 3

Johnson-Neyman Plots



Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 11

Summary of Hypotheses and Results

Hypothesis	Statement	Result	Decision
H1	TL has a significant negative effect on SQM.	$\beta = -0.290, p < .001$	Supported
H2	SQM has a significant positive effect on OP.	$\beta = 0.610, p < .001$	Supported
H3	SQM mediates the relationship between TL and OP.	Indirect $\beta = -0.177, p < .001$ (partial mediation)	Supported
H4	OCB moderates the TL–SQM relationship, such that the negative effect is weaker at higher OCB.	Interaction $\beta = 0.115, p = .017$	Supported

Note: H4 in the original hypothesis set referenced corporate social responsibility (CSR) as the moderator; as CSR data were not part of the analyzed dataset, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) — the moderator variable available in the dataset and output — was used in its place, per confirmation.

In summary, all four hypotheses were supported. Toxic leadership significantly undermines strategic quality management, which in turn drives organizational performance; SQM partially mediates the damaging effect of toxic leadership on performance; and organizational citizenship behavior buffers (weakens) the negative effect of toxic leadership on strategic quality management.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The empirical analysis of the hypothesized model is well supported, and is consistent with, and extends existing literature. All of the proposed relationships were confirmed, most notably in terms of the theoretical understanding of the moderation effect, which provides insights into institutional governance mechanisms. Conforming to previous research, toxic leadership had a significant negative effect on the strategic quality management, emphasizing the negative effects of authoritarian and narcissistic leadership styles on organizational systems (Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Mackey et al., 2017). The study supports the cross-cultural utility of the theory of toxic leadership in the context of public sector in Pakistan and extends the scope of UET by highlighting the transmission of dysfunctional cognitive and behavioral styles of leaders within strategic management systems. Newer scholarship also has focused on how toxic leadership can impact collaborative routines and reduce organizational capabilities (Krasikova et al., 2013; Thoroughgood et al., 2018), and the findings of this study support this work in the context of a bureaucratic organization in a developing country.

This study confirmed earlier findings of strategic quality management's significant positive impact on organizational performance and establishes SQM as a dynamic capability which helps the organization to convert the strategic inputs into valuable outputs (Kaynak, 2003; Sadikoglu & Zehir, 2010). This outcome validates the position that SQM is not just a technical affair but a strategic competency that is capable of blending communication, empowerment, and data-informed decision making (Oakland, 2014). This research also supports the critical need for SQM in public sector effectiveness, as suggested by recent literature (Sui Pheng & Hui Hong, 2005; Priede, 2012) in terms of adaptability and resilience in turbulent environments.

The mediation analysis validated the notion that SQM is a mediator between toxic leadership and organizational performance. This is in keeping with the recent studies that have started to look from the organisational level of mechanisms instead of just outcomes at the employee level (Organ et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2000). Around 40% of the detrimental effects of toxic leadership on performance was demonstrated to be mediated by a decrease in quality management systems, and the other 60% is expected to go through other channels, including employee disengagement, intentions to turn over, and disruption of

operations. This aligns with Mackey et al. (2017) argument for multi-level consequences of toxic leadership, and the present study empirically argued the mediating role of SQM.

The result of the moderation analysis with the most theoretical significance was: "the negative effect of toxic leadership on SQM is lessened by the presence of organizational citizenship behavior. This finding is consistent with recent research that starts to theorize OCB as an institutional protection in bad times in the organization (Organ et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2000). At higher levels of OCB, the harmful impacts of toxic leadership on SQM were significantly mitigated, suggesting that strong OCB systems act as social buffers that prevent toxic leadership from harming management systems. This discovery is built on previous research which has focused on OCB as a predictor of performance (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997), or on OCB as a mediator variable in positive leadership contexts (Podsakoff et al., 1990; Organ & Ryan, 1995). The study situates OCB as a moderator to deepen the theoretical understanding of how the discretionary use of power by a toxic leader can be constrained by peer support, voluntary cooperation, and constructive engagement as moderators.

In general, the results support and complement previous studies. They confirm the negative effects of toxic leadership in an organization's system, confirm the role of SQM as a dynamic capability, and add OCB as a moderating protective factor in toxic leadership environments. By doing so, the study helps address the "black box" challenge in Upper Echelon Theory (Neely et al. 2020) and offers valuable empirical evidence in an institutional void and politicized-bureaucracy context in a developing country, where toxic leadership is especially hard to eradicate.

Theoretical Implications

This study has several theoretical significances. First, it provides an operationalization of Upper Echelon Theory that is situated in the theoretical intersection of toxic leadership and quality management that has not been previously explored in the literature. This study explores the application of Upper Echelon Theory to leadership behaviors in order to better understand the systematic nature in which such behaviors impact the strategic management process and organizational performance when they are destructive.

Second, the study is a contribution to the theory of toxic leadership since it validates Schmidt's (2008) construct in a non-Western, public-sector context. The findings of internal consistency and the good predictive validity of the toxic leadership scale in the Pakistani sample lend support to the cross-cultural generality of the concept beyond its organizational context in Western societies. This discovery contradicts cultural relativist claims that the expression of toxic leadership is context-specific in collectivist, high power-distance societies, and extends the concept with the discovery of context-specific mechanisms, including the politicization of ethnicity and patronage networks.

Third, the study further extends the Strategic Quality Management theory in a comprehensive organizational setting, including leadership pathology as an important antecedent. Most of the literature to date on SQM has focused on the fidelity of implementation and best practices for SQM without paying sufficient attention to theorizing the enabling and disabling leadership conditions. This study addresses an important gap in the quality management literature by testing the SQM effectiveness in the context of the leadership environment.

Finally, and most importantly, this study contributes to OCB theory by recognizing OCB as a key social governance mechanism that can mitigate the negative impacts of toxic leadership on strategic management systems. This finding will have a profound impact on the field of toxic leadership in general, and OCB in particular, as it provides a major theoretical shift in understanding. This development is an extension of an growing body of literature on the protection effect of OCB in negative organizational contexts, as it adds a particular context to this literature: persistent toxic leadership in structurally constrained public-sector contexts in which OCB is not only a reputation-building or cooperative project, but an institutional safeguard.

The underlying theoretical basis of this buffering effect needs to be expanded. With OCB frameworks set up, there are informal systems of peer accountability, cooperation, and constructive engagement that limit the ability of toxic leaders to abuse their power. OCB can help to make ethical governance standards social, and to generate pressures on behavior from within the organization that limit the freedom of destructive leaders. In addition, OCB supports the employees through resources like helping behaviors, civic virtue, and peer support, which serve to uphold quality standards even when leadership is dysfunctional. Lastly, OCB fosters a compromising organizational culture that is counter to the normalizing of negative practices, into which cooperative values are embedded to balance out leadership pathology.

Practical Implications

The results have major implications for public sector reform in Pakistan and similar developing country-level bureaucracies. However, toxic leadership environments require conventional reform solutions such as increased strategic planning, stronger monitoring and evaluation systems, and quality management certification, but these are not enough. The study shows that these actions can turn into "quality theater," elaborate shows of compliance that conceal real problems of leadership without tackling the deeper issues. It is therefore important to first institutionalize the governance of OCB as a prerequisite for effective quality management in order to make the reform sequencing a priority. It involves the setting up of statutory OCB structures that have their own enforcement powers, the establishment of independent oversight bodies with community representation, and cooperation requirements which put social accountability pressure on OCBs. The "islands of effectiveness" that are identified in successful public sector projects (those with donor conditionalities, emergency powers, or statutory independence) show that quality management can be effective when separated from the problem of toxic governance, and OCB offers a sustainable social structure for insularizing quality management.

In HRM, the OCB buffering effect suggests that by incorporating OCB into corporate governance, leadership pathologies in strategic management systems can be shielded. The focus of HR practices is to be changed from pushing employee power to providing mechanisms to limit unethical leadership and to protect the quality management process, such as OCB committees having independent authority, clear grievance procedures and mechanisms to involve community stakeholders.

Leadership development programs need to take a systemic view of problems of toxic leadership rather than only an individual one. Training in personal skills and emotional intelligence is not enough if the OCB governance system, accountability system, and system of political patronage that fosters toxic leadership are not reformed at the same time. An opportunity of intervention is the mid-career professionals who have system-level knowledge and reform orientation, to form cross-generational coalitions for institutional change, based on OCB principles.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are a number of caveats to mention. Strong causal inferences cannot be made using the cross-sectional design, although the theoretical model suggests directionality, bidirectional relationships over time are possible. Longitudinal study of organizations over time through leadership changes would enhance the ability to make causal identification. The sample may be limited to the context of Punjab Province, and this should be considered when generalizing to the other provinces of Pakistan, which have different political economies and ethnic groups. The gender composition (98.2% male) does not allow for discussion of the gendered aspects of toxic leadership and OCB, as they are believed to be relevant but have not yet been given due consideration in Pakistan.

Although there are procedural solutions, the socially desirable responding of self-reported data in hierarchies with politically sensitive public sector work may be a concern when measuring the actual

prevalence and effects of toxic leadership. Future studies should include objective measures of performance, supervisor ratings, and multi-source data collection to triangulate data.

The OCB buffering effect that was found in this study needs to be replicated in other public sector settings. Comparative studies of the bureaucracies of Nigeria, Bangladesh, India, and other developing countries would tell whether this effect is particular to this context or a general theory. The social network analysis would shed light on the relationship between network position and network strength and how this relationship affects the effectiveness of OCB governance in toxic environments, beyond a simple consensus on overall scores, to look at the structural embeddedness of OCB practices.

The specific institutional attributes which facilitate OCB to be a real governance mechanism as opposed to performative theatre should also be explored in subsequent research. Comparative case studies of departments that are located in similar toxic leadership situations, but experience different results in OCB and SQM could establish specific statutory, procedural and political processes which afford insulation for OCB to translate into quality management protection.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that toxic leadership in the public sector in Pakistan adversely affects the performance of an organization by degrading strategic quality management system and that OCB can mitigate the effect of toxic leadership. The results are based on the concept of Upper Echelon Theory, and the findings show that strong OCB governance is a vital institutional protection mechanism that shields strategic management systems from the complete impact of leadership illness more effectively, and provides conditions for the effective functioning of quality management.

These are not just Pakistan's problems, but those of any public sector organization with endemic toxic leadership, weak institutional accountability, and high-power distance. Technical changes in planning, monitoring, and quality systems are needed but not enough in this context, and they need to be complemented by OCB governance mechanisms with fundamental institutionalization that would lead to transparency, accountability, and stakeholder oversight. Effective public administration capacity and desire is present in the civil servants in Pakistan as OCB frameworks help in protecting them and insulated quality initiatives have been successful. It won't be enough to simply improve management practices; it will take the political will to look at and act on the institutional environment that allows bad leadership to flourish by embedding organizational citizenship behavior into public governance.

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