

Ruling with an iron fist: the impact of despotic leadership on affective commitment through trust in leader and voice climate

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates the impact of despotic leadership on employees' affective organizational commitment (AOC) by incorporating trust in the leader and voice climate as parallel mediators.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected from 304 employees working in Pakistan. The direct and indirect relationships were tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4) for SPSS.

Findings – The findings showed a negative relationship between despotic leadership and AOC. The findings also showed that despotic leadership negatively affected employees' trust in the leader and voice climate. Finally, both trust in the leader and voice climate were found to parallelly mediate the relationship between despotic leadership and AOC.

Originality/value – This study extends the dark leadership literature by providing empirical evidence on the parallel mediation roles of trust in the leader and voice climate in the relationship between despotic leadership and AOC.

Keywords Despotic leadership, Trust in the leader, Voice climate, Affective organizational commitment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Researchers are increasingly focusing on studying the destructive behaviors exhibited by individuals in leadership positions within organizations (Usman *et al.*, 2025). This interest stems from high-profile corporate scandals (e.g. Enron, Theranos and WorldCom) that have garnered widespread media controversy and exposed the far-reaching consequences of leadership misconduct (Naseer *et al.*, 2016; Tourish and Willmott, 2023). Prior research has identified various negative leadership styles (e.g. abusive, despotic, exploitative, narcissistic and toxic), and among these, despotic leadership is considered the most destructive (Albashiti *et al.*, 2021). A recent review by Khizar *et al.* (2023) highlights that despotic leadership is conceptually distinct from other destructive forms, such as abusive supervision, petty tyranny, toxic leadership and unethical leadership, due to its authoritarian orientation, controlling, self-aggrandizing and exploitative behaviors and disregard for moral and ethical norms.

Despotic leadership has been linked to negative employee outcomes, such as decreased job satisfaction, well-being and work-related happiness, as well as increased turnover intentions and counterproductive work behaviors (Albashiti *et al.*, 2021; Hamid, 2025; Usman *et al.*, 2025). However, the effect of despotic leadership on employees' affective organizational commitment (AOC) remains underexplored. Organizations aim to retain highly committed employees, as they exhibit lower turnover intentions, higher performance, satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviors (Cao *et al.*, 2020; Kmiecik, 2022). Given this,



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identifying the antecedents of AOC remains a crucial research endeavor (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Against this backdrop, this study seeks to advance understanding by investigating how leaders' despotic behaviors reduce employees' AOC.

Moreover, the underlying mechanisms through which despotic leadership reduces employees' commitment remain unclear, which warrants further empirical investigation (Usman *et al.*, 2025). Accordingly, this study advances prior research by employing a parallel mediation model to examine how trust in the leader and voice climate jointly mediate the relationship between despotic leadership and AOC.

Trust functions as a core mechanism through which the effects of leadership behaviors are realized within leader-follower relationships (Legood *et al.*, 2021). When trust in leadership is absent, employees demonstrate poorer behaviors, performance and job attitudes (cf. Burke *et al.*, 2007). Leaders who exhibit destructive behaviors do not inspire trust (Hassanein *et al.*, 2025), and may foster negative employee attitudes (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Drawing from social exchange theory (SET; Blau, 1964), leaders' harmful behaviors (such as those demonstrated by despotic leadership: authoritarian, manipulative and self-aggrandizing) (Hamid, 2025), may weaken employees' socio-emotional bonding (i.e. trust), ultimately reducing their positive work-related attitudes (e.g. affective commitment) (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, the second aim of this study is to examine whether trust in the leader mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and AOC.

Furthermore, voice climate is rooted in Schneider *et al.*'s (2000) argument that climate perceptions must be linked to specific organizational contexts, such as employee voice. A positive voice climate (Brykman and Maerz, 2023) enables employees to speak up about issues like fraud, harassment, mistreatment and unethical conduct in organizations (Morrison, 2023). In a favorable voice climate, employees feel safe to speak without fear of retaliation (Brykman and Maerz, 2023). According to Brooks *et al.* (2023, p. 682), there is a substantial body of evidence that "leadership is important for creating voice climates and voice mechanisms". Based on signaling theory (Spence, 1974), when employees are exposed to leadership behaviors that demand complete obedience and prohibit questioning or disagreement (i.e. despotic leadership) (De Hoogh and De Hartog, 2008), these behaviors send clear signals that raising their voice or dissenting against the leader will be harmful and could lead to dire consequences. Moreover, prior literature suggests that specific types of climates (e.g. voice climate) may mediate the relationship between employees' perceptions of leadership and resulting employee outcomes (Frazier and Bowler, 2015). Against this background, the third aim of this research is to investigate whether voice climate mediates the links between despotic leadership and AOC.

Research contributions

This research makes several meaningful contributions. First, despite growing interest in destructive leadership forms, findings on their effects on AOC remain inconclusive (see Wang *et al.*, 2022). Amongst these leadership styles, despotic leadership has received limited attention pertaining to its impact on employees' affective commitment. Yuan *et al.* (2022) argue that leaders stimulate employees' intrinsic motivation, which in turn fosters organizational attachment. However, destructive leadership behaviors (e.g. exploitative, self-aggrandizing and punitive, that are exhibited by despotic leadership) have been shown to negatively affect employees' happiness at work (Hamid, 2025), work engagement (Hamid and Kundi, 2025b) and may also reduce their commitment to the organization (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Building on these insights, and responding to calls by Ampofo and Karatepe (2022) and Wang *et al.* (2022), this study proposes that despotic leadership will negatively affect employees' AOC.

Second, while most research on negative leadership and followers' trust in leadership focuses on abusive supervision (see meta-analysis by Legood *et al.*, 2021), the role of trust in the leader under despotic leadership remains largely unexplored. Haq *et al.* (2022) have called

for further investigation into the effects of despotic leadership in relation to trust in the leader, which this study addresses by examining trust in the leader as a mediator in the relationship between despotic leadership and AOC. Third, Börnfelt (2022) has called for more research on the effects of destructive leadership on voice climate. More specifically, the present research extends the understanding of how leaders with harmful and hostile tendencies (e.g. vengeful behaviors, explicit intolerance toward dissent and expectation of unquestioning obedience) (Albashiti *et al.*, 2021) foster employees' perceptions of negative voice climate. Furthermore, although existing studies have demonstrated that employees' positive perceptions of voice climate lead to work engagement and affective commitment (Ditchburn and Hames, 2014; Kundi *et al.*, 2024), research has yet to fully understand how employees' negative perceptions of voice climate are developed in the presence of despotic leadership, which in turn reduces their AOC. Additionally, this study contributes to the voice climate literature (Frazier and Bowler, 2015) by advancing research on its nomological network of antecedents and outcomes. Building on this, the present study proposes that voice climate may mediate the relationship between despotic leadership and AOC.

Fourth, this study contributes to research on negative leadership styles in a non-Western context. Despotic leadership is particularly more prevalent in highly collectivist and power-distance societies like Pakistan (Naseer *et al.*, 2016). Despite this, limited empirical work has explored how despotic leadership affects employees' trust in the leader within this context (Haq *et al.*, 2022), which, in turn, undermines positive employee attitudes and behaviors. In such cultures (e.g. Pakistan), opposing leaders, especially those exhibiting narcissistic, evil and harmful behaviors, become challenging (Khizar *et al.*, 2023). As a result, individuals rather than reacting towards the offender (e.g. despotic leader), who may negatively affect their relational fulfillment (i.e. trust), are more likely to react through indirect means, such as demonstrating negative attitudes (e.g. reduced affective commitment). Similarly, the concept of voice remains underexplored in Pakistan (Aslam and Akhtar, 2023). In high power distance and uncertainty-avoidance countries (e.g. Pakistan), leaders may be highly controlling, expect unquestioning obedience from followers and may not tolerate questioning or disagreement (De Clercq *et al.*, 2018), which may foster employees' negative perceptions of voice climate and subsequently decrease their sense of inclusion and belonging to the organization. In light of the above, the present research, using data from employees working in Pakistan, developed a model in which trust in the leader and voice climate parallelly mediate the impact of despotic leadership on employees' AOC (see Figure 1).

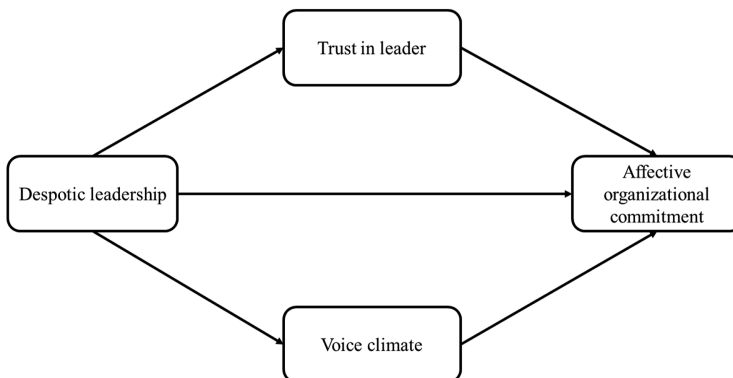


Figure 1. Research model. Source(s): Author's own work

Hypotheses development

Despotic leadership and affective organizational commitment

Despotic leadership has been described as exploitative, vengeful, controlling, highly self-centered, dominating, authoritarian and lacking moral integrity and ethical standards (De Hoogh and De Hartog, 2008). Leaders with despotic inclinations demand unquestioned obedience and exhibit manipulative tendencies (Naseer *et al.*, 2016). A growing body of evidence indicates the harmful effects of despotic leadership, such as its positive association with employees' turnover intentions (Albashiti *et al.*, 2021) and negative association with citizenship behaviors, employee performance, creativity (Naseer *et al.*, 2016), work engagement (Hamid and Kundi, 2025b) and happiness at work (Hamid, 2025). On the other hand, AOC refers to employees' emotional attachment to and involvement in the organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991). It reflects employees' psychological state concerning their decision to either remain in or withdraw their membership from the organization (Wang *et al.*, 2022) and is regarded as an attitudinal outcome of leadership (Wang *et al.*, 2021).

This study proposes a negative relationship between despotic leadership and AOC. First, prior research demonstrates that employees exhibit lower AOC when exposed to destructive leadership behaviors, as unfair treatment by leaders diminishes their sense of workplace belonging (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Second, based on SET (Blau, 1964), relationships are reinforced through reciprocal exchanges (Gouldner, 1960); when leaders act fairly, employees reciprocate with favorable attitudes and behaviors (Aboramadan *et al.*, 2022), whereas unfair treatment by leaders prompts negative reciprocity from employees (Hamid and Kundi, 2025b). Moreover, employees view leaders as representatives of the organization and tend to reciprocate toward the leader and/or the organization they represent, depending on their experiences with the leader (Hamid and Kundi, 2025b). When employees encounter a self-serving leader—one who prioritizes personal interests, treats subordinates unfairly, is vengeful and exploits others (Naseer *et al.*, 2016)—they perceive an imbalance in the exchange relationship, where the benefits received are not commensurate with their input, resulting in feelings of exploitation. Because, in the case of despotic leadership, directly opposing or confronting the leader may be challenging, particularly in high power-distance cultures (Naseer *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, consistent with the principle of negative reciprocity, employees are more likely to reciprocate leaders' negative treatment through indirect means (Hamid and Kundi, 2025b), such as by reducing their affective commitment to the organization (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

- H1.* Despotic leadership is negatively associated with affective organizational commitment.

Mediating role of trust in the leader

Trust refers to a psychological condition involving an individual's willingness to accept vulnerability, grounded in positive expectations about another's intentions or behavior (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). In the organizational context, trust in the leader reflects the extent of employees' confidence that their leader will act fairly, demonstrate integrity and refrain from deceiving them for personal gain (MacKenzie *et al.*, 2001).

This study predicts that despotic leadership will erode employees' trust in the leader. First, prior research showed that negative leadership behaviors do not inspire trust in the leader (Decoster *et al.*, 2021; Hassanein *et al.*, 2025; Legood *et al.*, 2021; Schyns and Schilling, 2013). Second, in line with SET (Blau, 1964) and its socioemotional aspect (i.e. feelings of trust, Shore *et al.*, 2006), when employees experience leaders' destructive behaviors (e.g. authoritarianism, exploitation of others, high self-centeredness, punitive tendencies and prioritization of personal interests over others for personal gains) (De Hoogh and De Hartog, 2008) they are unlikely to trust the leader. This is because trust depends on the trustor's

positive beliefs about the trustee's intentions and behavior (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998); however, under despotic leadership—which fails to act fairly, lacks integrity and displays harmful behaviors—the employees positive beliefs erode, thereby severely impairing the development of their trust in the leader. Considering the above reasoning, it is logical to propose that:

H2. Despotic leadership is negatively associated with trust in the leader.

Existing research indicates that trust in the leader plays an intervening role in the relationship between leadership styles and employees' outcomes, including self-serving leadership and employees' desire for retaliation (Decoster *et al.*, 2021), and toxic leadership and employees' job satisfaction (Hassanein *et al.*, 2025). These relationships are facilitated by trust because it is a fundamental element in stabilizing interpersonal relationships and developing and maintaining positive social exchanges, as it encourages obligation to reciprocate (Legood *et al.*, 2021). In other words, positive leader-follower exchanges (Decoster *et al.*, 2021) and strong emotional ties (Haq *et al.*, 2022) are manifestations of trust. From the socioemotional perspective of SET (Shore *et al.*, 2006), when followers are confronted with a despotic leader who exploits others, a bond between the two is unlikely to emerge (Hamid and Kundi, 2025b) as followers perceive that the leader is not willing to engage in mutually beneficial social exchange (Decoster *et al.*, 2021). As a result, this lack of emotional bonding erodes followers' confidence (i.e. trust) in the leader (cf. Haq *et al.*, 2022), which in turn decreases their sense of belonging to the organization (i.e. AOC) (cf. Yuan *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, it is anticipated that despotic leadership reduces AOC by eroding followers' trust in the leader, which serves as a mediator. Formally,

H3. Trust in the leader mediates the negative relationship between despotic leadership and affective organizational commitment.

Mediating role of voice climate

Voice climate refers to employees' perceptions of the extent to which their organizational environment encourages the expression of ideas, opinions and concerns (Morrison *et al.*, 2011). It stems from an individual's cognitive evaluations, which inform their intentions to speak up or remain silent within the organizational context (Brykman and Maerz, 2023).

Leadership plays a central role in shaping voice climate perceptions (Brooks *et al.*, 2023), as leaders interpret and enforce organizational policies and practices related to workplace climate (Knoll *et al.*, 2021). Prior research indicates that destructive leadership behaviors, such as abusive supervision (Burris *et al.*, 2008) and supervisor undermining (Frazier and Bowler, 2015) decrease voice climate. While interest in how various leadership styles affect voice climate is increasing, despotic leadership—arguably one of the most destructive leadership styles—remains unexplored.

Accordingly, this study proposes that despotic leadership negatively affects voice climate. Signaling theory (Spence, 1974) suggests that in relationships characterized by information asymmetry, the more informed party (e.g. the leader) sends signals, which the less informed party (e.g. the followers) interpret to assess the former's intentions, trustworthiness and credibility. Leaders' behaviors serve as signals to followers (Banks *et al.*, 2021), shaping their perceptions of voice climate, which in turn influences their work-related attitudes and behaviors (Brooks *et al.*, 2023; Brykman and Maerz, 2023). Despotic leaders engage in intimidation, aggression and exhibit intolerance for questioning or dissent (Albashiti *et al.*, 2021). Such behaviors signal to employees that voicing concerns, such as those about unethical issues or leaders' misconduct, is unwelcome (Brooks *et al.*, 2023) and may provoke managerial retaliation and aggression (Frazier and Bowler, 2015; Tourish and Willmott, 2023). Consequently, employees perceive speaking up as futile and risky (reflecting their voice climate perceptions), which can lead to various negative consequences, including harm to their

career outcomes (Brykman and Maerz, 2023; Knoll *et al.*, 2021). Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Despotic leadership is negatively associated with voice climate.

A climate that supports a voice-friendly atmosphere has been linked to positive work-related outcomes, including work engagement and affective commitment (Ditchburn and Hames, 2014; Farndale *et al.*, 2011; Kundi *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, when employees perceive that voicing concerns is unsafe and not welcome, i.e. a negative voice climate (Brykman and Maerz, 2023), it may lead to their negative attitudes and behaviors toward the organization (Kundi *et al.*, 2024).

Empirical research has demonstrated that voice climate serves as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between leadership and employee outcomes (see, e.g. Brykman and Maerz, 2023; Frazier and Bowler, 2015; Liu *et al.*, 2017). Extending this line of inquiry, the present study posits that voice climate mediates the negative relationship between despotic leadership and AOC. Under the umbrella of signaling theory (Spence, 1974), leaders' behaviors act as cues that followers interpret to assess norms, expectations and potential risks in the workplace (Banks *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, through these signals, leaders shape employees' perceptions of what is safe or appropriate to express (Brykman and Maerz, 2023). For example, leaders who demonstrate low integrity and despotic inclinations (Tourish and Willmott, 2023) may signal that the upward voice is discouraged, reflecting a negative voice climate (Brooks *et al.*, 2023). This perceived negative voice climate (Brykman and Maerz, 2023), formed through the interpretation of leaders' signaling behaviors (Banks *et al.*, 2021), in turn, influences employees' attitudes and behaviors (Liu *et al.*, 2017). Hence, when leaders' behaviors—unquestioning obedience, no tolerance for disagreement or questioning (De Hoogh and De Hartog, 2008)—explicitly express intolerance toward voice, employees interpret these signals, form perceptions of a negative voice climate, and consequently reduce their affective commitment to the organization. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5. Voice climate mediates the negative relationship between despotic leadership and affective organizational commitment.

Method

Participants and procedure

The survey was conducted online among Pakistani employees (Kundi *et al.*, 2025) recruited via LinkedIn (Hamid and Kundi, 2025a). Participants were encouraged to share the survey within their networks, allowing each invited participant to act as a recruiter and aiding in achieving the desired response size (Baltar and Brunet, 2012). Before starting the survey, participants were provided with information regarding the survey on the first page of the online form. This information included: (1) eligibility criteria (i.e. full-time employment, currently working in an organization excluding self-employment and residing in Pakistan), (2) the purpose of the data collection, (3) assurance that no personally identifiable information is collected, (4) a statement confirming that participation is voluntary, (5) and that there are no right or wrong answers and that candid response is encouraged, (6) participants were informed they could exit the survey at any time and (7) confirmation that all responses will remain confidential. Including this information serves as an *ex ante* strategy to mitigate potential method bias, which can otherwise inflate or deflate observed relationships and increase the risk of Type I and Type II errors (Chen *et al.*, 2018) as well as alleviate social desirability bias and evaluation apprehension (Verdorfer *et al.*, 2024). Finally, participants were informed that by proceeding with the survey, they acknowledged reading and understanding the provided information and thereby gave their informed consent to participate.

Prior to distributing the survey, the scales' items were subject to pilot testing with 66 participants, who did not participate in the main study. The pilot study data were subjected to reliability and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to develop a parsimonious representation of the constructs. The results of the EFA of principal components revealed four constructs (i.e. all items were loaded onto their respective construct with factor loadings >0.70). These four constructs represented 83.41% of the total variance in the data. Subsequently, the survey was finalized for administration, and a total of 304 employees, representing various industries, completed the survey. To ensure the adequacy of the sample size ($n = 304$), a posthoc power analysis (input: six predictors (including control variables), p -value 0.05 and effect size (f^2): 2.507), was conducted using GPower software (Cohen, 1988). The results revealed that the final sample size provided substantial statistical power (i.e. power = 1.0). Finally, in terms of demographics, 90.5% of the participants were male, 36.8% and 39.1% were in the age group of ≤ 30 and 31–40, respectively, 89.1% had 10 years or less organizational tenure and 99% had a bachelor's degree or higher.

Measures

The survey was administered in English, as it is the official language of Pakistan (Hamid *et al.*, 2025). All the scales were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). *Despotic leadership* ($\alpha = 0.953$) was assessed using four items taken from De Hoogh and De Hartog (2008). *Trust in leader* ($\alpha = 0.971$) was assessed using a three-item scale initially developed by Podsakoff *et al.* (1990) to measure trust in and loyalty to the leader, which was later modified by MacKenzie *et al.* (2001) to fit for assessing trust in the leader. *Voice climate* ($\alpha = 0.922$) was assessed using a three-item scale adopted from Knoll *et al.* (2021) that is built on the measures developed by Morrison *et al.* (2011). AOC ($\alpha = 0.937$) was assessed using two items taken from Allen and Meyer (1990). In this study, respondents' age, gender and tenure were taken as controls.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables. Considering the correlations between variables were higher than 0.70, a multicollinearity test was run. The scores of variance inflation factor (VIF) are between 3.024 and 4.742, which is below the rule-of-thumb cut-off of VIF less than 10 (Neter *et al.*, 1996), suggesting that multicollinearity is not a problem.

Measurement model

As shown in Table 2, the results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated that the hypothesized four-factor model fits the data well ($\chi^2 = 96.773$, $df = 48$, $p < 0.01$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.990, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.986, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.020 and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.058) and superior to alternative models, including a three-factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 244.277$, $\Delta df = 3$), two-factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 404.039$, $\Delta df = 5$) and one-factor ($\Delta\chi^2 = 742.450$, $\Delta df = 6$). The results, as shown in Table 1, demonstrate that for each variable, composite reliability values were above 0.70 and the average variance extracted (AVE) scores of the variables were above 0.50, establishing convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Moreover, the AVE values of each variable were higher than its respective average shared variance and maximum shared variance, which is an indication of good discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 1. Correlation matrix with means and standard deviations

Variables	Means	SD	AVE	ASV	MSV	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. DL	2.886	1.442	0.836	0.677	0.778	(0.953)						
2. TIL	2.803	1.439	0.917	0.750	0.778	−0.846**	(0.971)					
3. VC	2.845	1.275	0.798	0.707	0.747	−0.745**	0.811**	(0.922)				
4. AOC	2.440	1.301	0.885	0.684	0.725	−0.728**	0.805**	0.789**	(0.939)			
5. Gender	1.095	0.294	–	–	–	−0.068	0.068	0.104	0.114*	–		
6. Age	1.898	0.824	–	–	–	−0.215**	0.270**	0.234**	0.296**	−0.164**	–	
7. Tenure	1.421	0.770	–	–	–	−0.290**	0.344**	0.293**	0.356**	−0.105	0.613**	–

Note(s): *N* = 304

** significant at 0.01 level and * significant at 0.05 level

Abbreviations: SD: standard deviation, AVE: average variance extracted, ASV: average shared variance, MSV: maximum shared variance. DL = despotic leadership, TIL = trust in leader, VC = voice climate, AOC = affective organizational commitment. Diagonal elements are composite reliabilities

Source(s): Author's own work

Table 2. Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Model	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δ df	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
Hypothesized four-factor model	96.773**	48	–	–	0.990	0.986	0.020	0.058
Three-factor model: TIL and VC combined	341.050**	51	244.277**	3	0.940	0.923	0.042	0.137
Two-factor model: TIL, VC and AOC combined	500.812**	53	404.039**	5	0.908	0.885	0.045	0.167
One-factor model	839.223**	54	742.450**	6	0.838	0.802	0.058	0.219

Note(s): $N = 304$. Four-factor model was compared to all alternative models. ** $p < 0.01$

Abbreviations: TIL = trust in leader, VC = voice climate, AOC = affective organizational commitment

Source(s): Author's own work

Common method bias

Given that the data for all the study variables were collected at a single point in time, a concern for common method bias (CMB) arises. In addition to the *ex ante* remedies discussed earlier, further steps were taken to address the potential for CMB. The presence of CMB was assessed using the CFA version of Harman's single-factor model and the latent common method factor (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). First, the results of the CFA single-factor model indicated a poor fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 839.223$, $df = 54$, $p < 0.01$, CFI = 0.838, TLI = 0.802, SRMR = 0.058 and RMSEA = 0.219), significantly worse than the proposed four-factor model. Second, two measurement models were tested: (1) the model without the latent variable and (2) the model with the inclusion of a latent common method factor (Collier, 2020). A chi-square difference test between the two models—before ($\chi^2 = 96.773$, $df = 48$) and after ($\chi^2 = 96.103$, $df = 47$), adding the latent factor—was not significant ($\Delta\chi^2 = 0.67$, $p = 0.413$). These findings suggest that CMB is not a significant concern in this study.

Hypotheses testing

The hypothesized parallel mediation model was tested using Hayes PROCESS Model 4 in SPSS with a 5,000 bootstrap sampling technique. This approach is also used by leadership researchers (e.g. Aboramadan *et al.*, 2022) to test the mediation model. The results of the hypotheses testing are presented in Table 3. The analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between despotic leadership and AOC ($\beta = -0.602$, $t = -16.643$, 95% confidence interval (CI) $[-0.674, -0.531]$, *Hypothesis 1 is supported*). A significant negative relationship was found between despotic leadership and trust in the leader ($\beta = -0.808$, $t = -25.533$, CI $[-0.870, -0.746]$, *Hypothesis 2 is supported*). Moreover, the results suggest a significant positive relationship between trust in the leader and AOC ($\beta = 0.354$, $t = 5.732$, CI $[0.233, 0.476]$). The indirect effect of despotic leadership on AOC through trust in the leader was significant, $\beta = -0.286$, standard error (SE) = 0.063, CI $[-0.407, -0.161]$. The 95% CI for this indirect effect does not include zero, indicating a significant mediation (*Hypothesis 3 is supported*). Furthermore, a significant negative relationship was found between despotic leadership and voice climate ($\beta = -0.628$, $t = -17.730$, CI $[-0.698, -0.559]$; *Hypothesis 4 is supported*). The results revealed that the relationship between voice climate and AOC is also significant ($\beta = 0.375$, $t = 6.793$, CI $[0.266, 0.484]$). The indirect effect of despotic leadership on AOC through voice climate was significant ($\beta = -0.236$, SE = 0.037, 95% CI $[-0.311, -0.164]$). The 95% CI for this indirect effect does not include zero, indicating a significant mediation (*Hypothesis 5 is supported*).

Table 3. Results of PROCESS macro-Model 4

Regression model	β	SE	LLCI	ULCI
<i>IV on mediators</i>				
DL → TIL	-0.808	0.032	-0.870	-0.746
Tenure → TIL	0.153	0.073	0.010	0.296
DL → VC	-0.628	0.035	-0.698	-0.559
<i>Mediators on DV</i>				
TIL → AOC	0.354	0.062	0.233	0.476
VC → AOC	0.375	0.055	0.266	0.484
<i>Total effect of IV on DV</i>				
DL → AOC	-0.602	0.036	-0.674	-0.531
Gender → AOC	0.428	0.172	0.090	0.766
Age → AOC	0.158	0.077	0.007	0.310
Tenure → AOC	0.187	0.083	0.023	0.350
<i>Direct effect of IV on DV</i>				
DL → AOC	-0.080	0.053	-0.186	0.025
<i>Indirect effects of IV on DV</i>				
DL → TIL → AOC	-0.286	0.063	-0.407	-0.161
DL → VC → AOC	-0.236	0.037	-0.311	-0.164

Note(s): $N = 304$

Controls: age, gender and tenure. Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals are reported

Abbreviations: SE: standard error; LLCI = lower limit confidence interval; ULCI = upper limit confidence interval; DL = despotic leadership, TIL = trust in leader, VC = voice climate, AOC = affective organizational commitment, IV = independent variable, DV = dependent variable

Source(s): Author's own work

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to deepen the understanding of the underlying mechanisms (i.e. trust in the leader and voice climate) through which despotic leadership affects employees' AOC. First, the results showed that despotic leadership negatively relates to employees' AOC. This suggests that employees are less likely to develop affective commitment to their organization when exposed to authoritarian and self-serving leadership behaviors. This finding aligns with prior research, which suggests that destructive leadership behaviors are negatively associated with AOC (Wang *et al.*, 2021). It also lends support to SET (Blau, 1964), which posits that, when employees encounter a highly self-serving leader and perceive that their contributions outweigh the benefits received, they experience an imbalance in the exchange relationship. Such imbalance prompts negative reciprocity, wherein employees respond to despotic leadership with reduced AOC.

Second, the results reveal that leaders who display self-aggrandizing, punitive and exploitative behaviors (i.e. despotic leadership) do not inspire followers' trust in the leader, thereby diminishing their AOC. This is consistent with SET (Blau, 1964), which emphasizes that trust erodes when employees experience unfair treatment from leaders who exploit and deceive others for personal gains, as employees would question the willingness of such leaders to engage in mutually beneficial social exchanges, and in turn they will have less trust in the leader and reciprocate by reducing their attitudinal outcomes. It also aligns with prior research which showed that negative leadership styles erode employees' trust in the leader, which in turn leads not only to employees' desire for retaliation (Decoster *et al.*, 2021), but also to reduced attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Hassanein *et al.*, 2025; Legood *et al.*, 2021).

Third, the findings indicate that voice climate mediates the negative relationship between despotic leadership and AOC. This supports the observability aspect of signaling theory

(Spence, 1974), which suggests that followers interpret and make sense of their leaders' behaviors (signals) that shape their perceptions of acceptable conduct and associated risks in the workplace (Banks *et al.*, 2021). Thus, when leaders engage in despotic behaviors such as acting selfishly, discouraging questioning and suppressing dissenting voices (Hamid and Kundi, 2025b), employees interpret these actions as signals (Banks *et al.*, 2021) that speaking up is unsafe, risky and may result in negative consequences (Mao and DeAndrea, 2019; Tourish and Willmott, 2023). As a result, employees perceive increased barriers to expressing their opinions and concerns (e.g. about leader misconduct or unethical practices in the organization), which diminishes their sense of inclusion and belonging to the organization (i.e. AOC).

Finally, the findings from this study confirm that employees in Pakistan respond to despotic leadership by reducing their affective commitment to the organization. In high-power distance cultures, such as Pakistan, the fear of negative repercussions makes it difficult for employees to directly oppose or confront despotic leaders. Moreover, employees tend to view leaders as the representatives of the organization (Hamid and Kundi, 2025b), meaning that mistreatment by a despotic leader extends beyond the immediate leader-follower relationship and negatively affects employees' relationship with the organization. Consequently, rather than openly resisting despotic behaviors, employees are more likely to respond through indirect means, such as exhibiting negative attitudes (e.g. reducing their affective commitment). These findings also emphasize the critical role of cultural context in shaping how destructive leadership behaviors impact employees' attitudes and highlight the importance of considering relational and contextual underlying mechanisms, such as trust and voice climate, in understanding how hostile leadership behaviors affect employees and organizational well-being in non-Western, high power-distance contexts.

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the despotic leadership literature in several ways. First, empirical research examining the impact of despotic leadership on employees' AOC remains scarce. Hence, in response to the calls made by researchers (Ampofo and Karatepe, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2022), this study advanced research on the effects of despotic leadership on employees' AOC. Second, Legood *et al.* (2021), in their review, highlighted that existing research on negative leadership styles has primarily focused on abusive supervision when examining trust in the leader as a mediating mechanism. However, the role of trust in the leader in mediating the effects of the authoritarian, highly self-centered, self-aggrandizing and punitive form of negative leadership (i.e. despotic leadership) on employee affective commitment remains unexplored. By addressing the call from Haq *et al.* (2022), this study provided new empirical insights into how despotic leadership affects follower outcomes (i.e. AOC) through trust in the leader. Third, Börnfelt (2022) proposed future research to extend the understanding of the effects of negative leadership on voice climate. Addressing this call, the present study extended the literature on despotic leadership (Albashiti *et al.*, 2021) by investigating its impact on employees' perceptions of voice climate. Besides, this research contributed to the voice climate literature (Frazier and Bowler, 2015; Liu *et al.*, 2017) by identifying a key antecedent (i.e. despotic leadership) that fosters employees' perceptions of negative voice climate, which in turn leads to a negative employee attitudinal outcome (reduced AOC). In doing so, this research reinforced the importance of voice climate as a mediating mechanism.

Practical implications

The results reveal that despotic leadership weakens employees' affective commitment to the organization. This is because employees who experience exploitation, hostility and unfair treatment from their leader tend to reciprocate with a lower commitment towards the organization. Therefore, organizations' leadership development programs should focus on developing and fostering ethical behavior in managers that promote employee well-being and

commitment. Furthermore, organizations in Pakistan should strengthen managerial accountability by adopting transparent performance evaluations and behavioral assessments to deter destructive leadership and encourage integrity in management practices.

Moreover, this research highlights that followers' trust in the leader is fundamental to leader-follower relationships. However, employees' socioemotional bonding (i.e. trust) does not develop with leaders who exhibit self-centered, punitive and hostile behaviors. Given this, trust in the leader serves as a key mechanism influencing AOC, reinforcing the need for leaders to demonstrate integrity and fairness. Organizations should prioritize building trust by promoting moral and ethical leadership and ensuring that managers interact with employees respectfully. Essentially, in high power-distance societies, such as Pakistan, managers can be trained to foster trust through actions such as displaying honesty, avoiding belittlement, communicating organizational goals clearly, sharing knowledge, maintaining transparency, fulfilling promises, providing regular feedback, recognizing work efforts, respecting and treating all employees fairly without any discrimination.

Furthermore, the study finds that voice climate mediates the negative effects of despotic leadership on AOC. Employees working under despotic leaders perceive speaking up as unwelcome and even punishable (Tourish and Willmott, 2023), leading to negative attitudes toward the leader or the organization that the leader represents. In highly collectivist and high power-distance contexts, where hierarchical relationships are emphasized, subordinates are less likely to challenge the authority or express concerns when confronted with harmful leadership behaviors. Therefore, organizations operating in countries marked by high power distance, such as Pakistan, must ensure that managers welcome dissent, encourage constructive criticism and empower employees to share ideas, concerns and voices against unethical behaviors without fear of retaliation.

Another crucial strategy involves developing emotional intelligence among managers. Emotional intelligence improves leaders' ability to regulate emotions, empathize with employees and build meaningful professional relationships. Organizations should implement mandatory emotional intelligence training for individuals in managerial roles, focusing on empathy, active listening and self-regulation. Educating managers to understanding employee emotions, prioritizing their well-being and maintaining professionalism in challenging situations can significantly contribute to a positive workplace culture. Training programs should also promote leader self-awareness, helping them recognize how their behaviors affect employees' psychological safety and affective commitment. Conducting regular brainstorming sessions and management meetings to address workplace challenges and develop strategies for managing stressful situations can further reinforce positive leadership practices.

Beyond leadership development, organizations must implement structural measures to mitigate despotic leadership behaviors. Establishing robust complaint mechanisms is an essential step. Employees should feel safe when reporting despotic leadership behaviors and organizations must ensure that complaints are handled confidentially. A strict policy should be in place to ensure prompt and unbiased action against unethical leadership behaviors. Evidence suggests that when organizations offer anonymous mechanisms for expressing concerns, employees feel secure in reporting unethical behaviors, which fosters a psychologically safe workplace environment (Mao and DeAndrea, 2019). Finally, organizations should refrain from hiring individuals who demonstrate despotic behaviors. For this purpose, organizations can make use of practitioner-oriented assessment scales that can facilitate the selection of individuals for leadership positions who demonstrate an inclination toward a desired leadership style (cf. Legood *et al.*, 2021).

Limitations and future research directions

This study has several potential limitations. First, the reliance on cross-sectional and self-reported data raises concerns regarding CMB. Although some scholars argue that CMB's impact on research outcomes may be negligible (Malhotra *et al.*, 2006), others contend that the issue is often

misunderstood and overstated (Spector, 2006). Nevertheless, to assess CMB, the CFA version of Harman's single-factor test was conducted in AMOS. The results, presented in Table 2, indicate that the one-factor model exhibited poor fit compared to the proposed four-factor model. Additionally, a latent common method factor technique was employed (Collier, 2020), and its results further suggested that CMB is unlikely to significantly affect the findings. However, due to the study's cross-sectional design, causal inferences could not be established. Future research could address this limitation by employing a longitudinal design, which would allow for a clearer understanding of causal effects over time and reduce the potential influence of CMB.

Second, a gender imbalance was present in the sample, as the majority of respondents identified as male. This may limit the generalizability of the findings across genders. Future research would benefit from a more balanced sample to explore potential gender-specific responses to despotic leadership. Furthermore, the study's focus on employees from a single country, Pakistan, limits the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or national contexts. Given that employees' perceptions and responses to despotic leadership may vary across cultures with differing levels of power distance (high vs low), future research could replicate this study in diverse cultural contexts. Such cross-cultural comparisons may offer valuable, empirically informed insights into how employees perceive leaders' despotism differ across cultural settings.

Third, this study focused solely on one form of negative leadership (i.e. despotic leadership). Future research could broaden the scope by comparing the effects of other dark leadership styles, such as abusive, authoritarian, exploitative and narcissistic, alongside despotic leadership. Exploring the relative impact of these leadership styles on employee outcomes would clarify how their effects differ and deepen understanding of the varying degrees of severity of each style's negative impact. Additionally, future research could explore how despotic leadership influences other critical employee outcomes, such as knowledge hiding, well-being (psychological, physical and social), subjective career success, career adaptability and career commitment.

Fourth, given the adverse effects of despotic leadership on employees and organizational well-being, future studies should investigate its antecedents. A promising avenue for research would be to examine organizational conditions that facilitate hostile, harmful, self-serving, punitive and exploitative leadership behaviors. Identifying organizational-level factors, such as authoritarian organizational culture, organizational corruption and unethical climate, may offer valuable insights into how such environments enable and legitimize unethical and immoral leadership practices. Understanding the structural, cultural and contextual drivers of despotic leadership—alongside other destructive styles like exploitative, self-protective and petty tyranny—could help organizations and policymakers with valuable insights for developing preventive strategies and targeted policy interventions.

Fifth, this study employed trust in the leader and voice climate as mediating variables. However, other underlying mechanisms may further explain the relationship between despotic leadership and employees' affective commitment. Future research could explore alternative mediators, such as the emotional culture of joy, meaningful work, or psychological safety. Finally, while the present study focused on mediators, future research should incorporate moderating variables to develop a more nuanced understanding. For instance, investigating how ethics-related boundary conditions (e.g. ethical work climate and ethical human resource management systems) can attenuate the negative effects of despotic leadership on employees' outcomes presents a valuable avenue for future research.

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