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Narcissism and Abusive Supervision: A Study Linking Personality Disorder Leading to Employees Counterproductive Outcomes in the HEIs

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ABSTRACT

Narcissistic leadership in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) represents a critical antecedent to abusive supervision, triggering detrimental faculty outcomes that undermine institutional effectiveness. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study examines the role of supervisors' narcissism that is manifested through authoritarianism and public humiliation and fuels abusive supervision, which subsequently depletes faculty resources and precipitates burnout, surface acting, and workplace gossip. Survey data from 400 faculty members across Malaysian public universities were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Results confirm narcissism significantly predicts abusive supervision which in turn directly intensifies burnout, surface acting, and gossip tendencies. Critically, abusive supervision mediates supervisor's narcissism effects on faculty member's cynicism and surface acting, while gossip also mediates abusive supervision's impact on faculty member's cynicism. These findings reveal a resource depletion mechanism wherein narcissistic leaders' aggression erodes faculty wellbeing and fosters counterproductive coping behaviors. The study urges Malaysian HEIs to implement leader accountability frameworks, restorative justice practices, and stress-reduction facilities to mitigate narcissism-driven abuse, aligning with national education reforms and sustainable institutional governance.

Introduction

Abusive and negative supervisory behaviors represent a serious threat to organizational effectiveness and employee well-being, a phenomenon rigorously documented across diverse organizational settings (Moin & Khan, 2025). Within Malaysian Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), where faculty members navigate the complex triad of teaching responsibilities, research productivity expectations, and administrative burdens, toxic leadership practices pose particular risks to institutional health and academic vitality (Zhong et al., 2025). The consequences of abusive supervision, including high employee cynicism, chronic emotional exhaustion, professional burnout, and counterproductive gossip behaviors, resonate in Malaysia's academic environment. These outcomes directly undermine core institutional missions, potentially contributing to declining research output, compromised teaching quality, and increasing faculty attrition rates, which have emerged as growing concerns within the national higher education landscape (Tariq et al., 2025). While prior research has illuminated broad consequences of abusive supervision (Haque & Lissillour, 2025), significant knowledge gaps persist when examining this phenomenon through the unique lens of academia, particularly within Malaysia's sociocultural context. Existing meta-analyses reveal inconsistent scholarly attention toward common outcomes like counterproductive work behavior, often neglecting critical faculty-specific repercussions such as research disengagement, pedagogical demotivation, and collaborative withdrawal, challenges that directly impact institutional rankings and educational quality.

This study directly addresses these research voids by extending Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to frame abusive supervision as a critical mechanism depleting faculty members' emotional, physical and cognitive resources. We propose an integrated model examining the role of narcissistic leadership tendencies in manifesting the behaviors like authoritarian decision making, public humiliation of faculty, or obstruction of research opportunities, promote abusive supervision. This supervisory abuse subsequently triggers four critical outcomes prevalent yet understudied in HEIs: high burnout from unsustainable workloads, cynicism toward institutional initiatives, emotionally draining surface acting during interactions, and workplace gossip functioning as an informal coping mechanism when formal grievance channels are perceived as ineffective or risky (Wang et al., 2025). Critically, the research validates abusive supervision's mediating role between supervisor's narcissism and the detrimental outcomes, a relationship previously theorized but insufficiently tested within academic settings. Post-pandemic acceleration of workload demands, coupled with intensifying performance metrics and institutional competition, creates environments ripe for resource depletion and supervisory strain (Liu & Ling, 2025). Similarly, the high-power distance cultural norms may discourage faculty from formally reporting abusive experiences, while bureaucratic complexities within public universities can inadvertently shield problematic leaders. By centering the experiences of Malaysian faculty and addressing locally relevant manifestations of supervisory abuse, this research contributes both empirical and contextual depth to understanding how leadership pathologies permeate academic institutions, ultimately affecting their capacity to fulfill educational missions.

Abusive supervision represents a significant breach of the implicit psychological contract between leader and follower (Wang, 2025). It encompasses public ridicule, belittlement, explosive outbursts, unjust blame, the silent treatment, and the arbitrary undermining of an employee's status or contributions. Such behavior creates a climate of fear, disrespect, and profound psychological distress (Hu et al., 2025). Within HEIs, where intellectual contribution, reputation, and collegial respect are paramount currencies, the impact of abusive supervision can be particularly devastating. Faculty members may see their research stifled, their teaching evaluations weaponized, or their opportunities for advancement blocked. Administrative staff may face

constant undermining, impossible demands, or public humiliation. This toxic workplace environment contradicts the collaborative and supportive philosophy of HEIs essential for academic excellence and institutional functioning. The origins of such destructive leadership often lie deep within the supervisor's personality structure (Tariq et al., 2025). Narcissism, as conceptualized within clinical psychology and increasingly studied in organizational settings, presents a potent risk factor. The individual high on narcissism are characterized by a pervasive pattern of grandiosity and a profound lack of empathy (Gauglitz et al., 2023). While not all the narcissistic individual becomes abusive supervisors, the traits inherent in narcissism create fertile ground for such behavior. When their inflated self-image is threatened, perhaps due to subordinate's success, a challenging question, or an independent thought, the narcissistic supervisor will react with aggression and abuse to reassert dominance and control (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023). The consequences of abusive supervision within Malaysian HEIs are far-reaching and detrimental. In the environment of abusive supervision, employees may engage in withdrawal behaviors such as high absenteeism, reduced citizenship behaviors. The Malaysian HEI context adds critical layers of complexity to this dynamic. Malaysia's strong collectivist culture emphasizes harmony, respect for authority, and hierarchical relationships (high power distance). While fostering stability, this cultural backdrop may inadvertently enable abusive narcissistic supervisors. Subordinates may be less likely to challenge supervisors directly or report abuse due to fears of disrupting harmony, retaliation, or being seen as disrespectful (Kim et al., 2025). Furthermore, Malaysian HEIs are undergoing intense transformation, facing pressures for international rankings, increased research output, financial sustainability, and meeting national educational goals. This high-pressure environment can aggravate the tendencies of narcissistic leaders, who may interpret pressure as justification for controlling, and abusive tactics to drive perceived performance.

Literature Review

Abusive Supervision

Abusive supervision has become a problematic issue for employees, supervisors, and organizations. Tepper (2000) has referred to it as a subordinate's perception of sustained non-physical mistreatment and non-verbal hostile behavior regarding their supervisors (Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervisors are highly concerned about the policies and procedures of organizations and therefore, they often lack the leadership skills required to manage the subordinates (Rice et al., 2025). Therefore, abusive supervision reduces organizational citizenship behavior and organizational productivity. Kim et al. (2025) have reported that the negative effects of abusive supervision are long-lasting, and it has a positive association with intention to quit and a negative association with job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Safavi and Bouzari (2025) found that the victims of abusive behaviors compared to others are more vulnerable to supervisors and coworkers' abuse. On the contrary, individuals who retaliate to abusive behavior are less vulnerable to supervisor's aggression and abuse (Arshad et al., 2025). Abusees develop psychological stress, depression, a drinking problem, and low satisfaction towards their jobs and their family, leading to work-family conflict and family-work conflict (Liu et al., 2025). Moreover, the victim of abuse often adopts deviant and aggressive behaviors with the supervisor and colleagues (Liu & Ling, 2025). The studies also report that some victims of abusive supervision become habitual of abusive behavior and consider it as a norm, and they do not react adversely.

Bhattacharjee and Sarkar (2024) suggest that supervisors often adopt abusive behavior when they perceive that the management violates psychological contract. While Marchant-Pérez et al. (2024) suggest excess authority, interactional injustice, and psychological distress also promote abusive

supervision. Past studies have also documented that self-esteem, personality traits and leadership styles influence abusive supervision (Marchant-Pérez et al., 2024; Tepper et al., 2011). (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024) assert that an employee's low self-esteem and abusive behavior are positively associated, while an individual's emotional intelligence negatively affects abusive behavior. Also, authoritarian leadership styles directly promote abusive supervision and mediate Machiavellianism and abusive supervision. The dissimilarity between supervisors' and subordinates' personality traits promotes conflicts, increases subordination, and adversely affects organizational performance.

Theoretical Grounding of the Conceptual Framework

We have extended the Conservation Resource Theory for identifying the constructs for the proposed conceptual framework. The developed conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1, followed by theoretical discussions on the developed hypotheses.

Conservation of Resources

COR theory postulates that individuals have tendencies to minimize resource loss and maximize resource gain. Both contribute to the stress process (Hobfoll, 2001). COR theory suggests that individuals make deliberate efforts to obtain (Hobfoll, 1989), retain (Hobfoll et al., 1990), and maintain their valued resources (Hobfoll, 2001). Individuals strive to minimize the threat to resource gain or loss (Hobfoll, 1989). Threats to resource loss include physical and psychological factors (e.g., wellbeing and self-esteem) (Moin & Khan, 2025). Moreover, employees utilize their resources to fulfill the work demands and attain positive outcomes (i.e., extrinsic or intrinsic). However, they developed social relations within the organization up to some extent to regain the resources.

According to the theory, the resources include home and food, individual traits such as self-esteem, employment conditions, wealth, and time and energies that are either internal (self-esteem and knowledge) or external (employment and wealth). The theory also postulates that individuals have tendencies to acquire, cultivate, and retain resources. Extending the COR theory, we have developed a conceptual framework to get an in-depth insight into the abusive supervision phenomena. The COR theory posits that individuals strive to maintain, protect and conserve their emotional, cognitive, and physical resources and when they feel a threat of resource loss, they tend to become aggressive and abusive to protect their resources (Liu et al., 2025). Based on this theory, it can be asserted that supervisors become abusive towards the subordinates when they feel the threat of resource loss. The depletion of emotional, physical, or cognitive resources due to high job demands, neurotic subordinates, work-family conflict, or pressure of meeting deadlines results in burnout and job stress. Due to this burnout, subordinates display aggression and hostile behaviors at the workplace. The theoretical discussion on the development of the hypotheses is presented in the following sections.

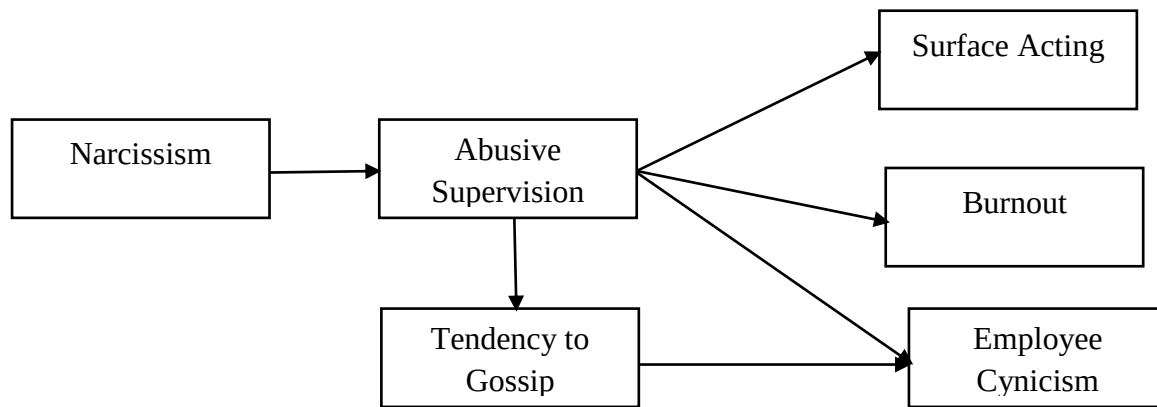


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Hypotheses Development

The following section contains theoretical discussions on the proposed hypotheses proposed in the developed conceptual framework.

Abusive Supervision and Burnout

Abusive supervision stimulates anxiety, depression, and burnout, which adversely affects organizational and job performance (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). Burnout refers to the emotional exhaustion or depletion of emotional resources, depersonalization or experienced distance from others, diminished personal accomplishment, or lack of confidence in one's ability to relate to others (Tariq et al., 2025). Haque and Lissillour (2025) suggest that emotional exhaustion is an essential component of burnout, but many studies, emotional exhaustion and burnout have used them interchangeably. Prior studies have extended the Conservation Resource Theory and stated that some employees retaliate to abusive behavior, while others do not. Those who do not retaliate to abusive behavior hide their emotions, leading to burnout (Liu et al., 2025). Similarly, burnout's adverse consequences are low personal accomplishments, low job satisfaction, and adverse organizational performance (Safavi & Bouzari, 2025). Moreover, abusive supervision behavior also promotes interpersonal conflict, deviant behavior, and burnout (Kim et al., 2025). Based on the findings of stated studies, it is asserted that abusive behavior is the employees' perception of abusive behaviors, which leads to overstress and emotional exhaustion. Lower organizational resources and emotional support are more likely to trigger employees' emotional exhaustion and reduce employees' job satisfaction and motivational levels (Marchant-Pérez et al., 2024).

H1: Abusive supervision and burnout are positively associated.

Abusive Supervision and Employee Cynicism

Employee cynicism is a unique and distinct construct that reduces employees' job satisfaction and trust within an organization (Liu et al., 2025). Researchers have conceptualized cynicism as the dispositional conceptualizations and negative attitudes regarding authorities' unmet expectations (Atamba et al., 2023). Moreover, studies have found that abusive behaviors promote negative affectivity in employees, due to which they tend to develop doubts about the integrity and intentions of their employers (Kim et al., 2025). Researchers argue that abusive behaviors adversely affect interpersonal relationships and culture, increasing cynicism's intensity significantly (Omar Ahmed & Zhang, 2025). Therefore, factors such as interrelationships between

employers and employees, downsizing, unpleasant working environment contribute towards emotional exhaustion and deviant behaviors, which leads to employee cynicism.

H2: Abusive supervision and employee cynicism are positively associated.

Abusive Supervision and Surface Acting

Surface acting is a phenomenon in which abused and emotionally hurt employees do not display their actual feelings, resulting in cognitive and emotional dissonance (Zhao et al., 2025). Instead, they smile, stay pleasant, and show kindness to others (Hu et al., 2025). Tariq et al. (2025) assert that surface acting can be either an inherited or an adapted trait. Many earlier studies have found that abusive supervision promotes surface acting (Ming, Bai, & Lin, 2020). However, surface acting may reduce workplace abuse but adversely affects the employees' wellbeing (Inness et al., 2005). Wang et al. (2024) suggest that most employees in the service sector use surface acting as a coping strategy compared to the non-service sector. Despite customers' aggressive behaviors, the service sector employees adopt surface acting as employees display their behaviors based on the pre-developed script and do not express their inner feelings. Consequently, it stimulates accumulated emotional stress (Hu et al., 2025). In addition, the surface acting results in emotional exhaustion and, thus, adversely affects organizational performance and individual's wellbeing.

H3: Abusive supervision and surface acting are positively associated.

Abusive Supervision and Tendency to Gossip (H4)

Abusive supervision is a significant predictor of job-related and non-job-related gossip, negatively affecting the organizations' and employees' performance (Zhong et al., 2025). In many organizations, victims of abuse report incidents of deviant and abusive behavior. Most employees do not report the same for two reasons. One, they expect retaliation from the supervisors. Two, the employees are afraid that their future growth in the organization may suffer. Consequently, many employees, rather than retaliating to abuse, start gossiping to release their emotional stress (Liu et al., 2025). While validating the association between abusive supervision and tendency to gossip, Past studies also report that employees' perception of perceived fairness and control mediate abusive supervision and tendency to gossip (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). have documented that this association is universal and more common in developing countries (Zhong et al., 2025).

H4: Abusive supervision and the tendency to gossip are positively associated.

Narcissism and Abusive Supervision

The term "narcissism" usually refers to an individual who has a strong sense of entitlement, a grandiose sense of self-importance, and an intense love of self (Breevaart & Schyns, 2025). Narcissist individuals are highly energetic and have high self-esteem. Therefore, narcissist supervisors have higher expectations from subordinates. When subordinates' performance is below their expectations, they tend to become abusive towards their subordinates (Gauglitz et al., 2023). Many past studies have found a positive association between supervisors' narcissism and abusive behavior (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023). Narcissists have a high self-concept and a big ego, due to which they have a low tolerance for criticism and feedback (Marchant-Pérez et al., 2024). Therefore, when narcissists receive criticism and negative feedback, they become abusive and adopt deviant behavior. A gender-based study found that narcissists tend to make sexual advances toward female employees. When female employees do not reciprocate positively, they become abusive and revengeful (Ali & Johl, 2020). Liu et al. (2025) suggest that a narcissist is more successful in those job environments that require less social interaction. At the same time,

Bhattacharjee and Sarkar (2024) assert that prior studies have also reported that employees get an inspiration from narcissist supervisors and follow them. On the contrary, (Gauglitz et al., 2023) found that narcissists are the toxic supervisors, but they have may increase employees' productivity. Many past studies have concluded that narcissists have more negative qualities than positive ones and abusive supervision is one of them. For example, narcissists overrate their performance, criticize others, and believe in punishing employees. When an employee points out narcissists' supervisors' shortcomings, they become more abusive and deviant (De Bruin & Finkelstein, 2023). Narcissist supervisors deliberately misguide others as they feel others' low job performance may give them more projection.

H5: Narcissism and abusive supervision are positively associated.

The Tendency to Gossip and Employee Cynicism

Workplace gossip refers to exchanges of personal information and judgmental opinions about other people while not in their presence (Grayson et al., 2025). Gossip and rumor break the harmony of the workplace unless it is well-managed. Despite its importance, studies have not examined them in organizations-related studies. Based on social information theory and social cognitive theory, Kuo et al. (2014) investigated the connection between worker behavior and gossip across a variety of Taiwanese sectors. According to the study, employee cynicism had a significant association with gossips at workplace. The study also discovered that the association between cynicism and psychological contract violation is mediated by gossip pertaining to an individual's job. Additionally, the study found that gossips unrelated to the workplace had a comparable but lower impact on employee cynicism (Liu et al., 2025). Thus Grayson et al. (2025) suggest that HR managers learn to manage workplace gossip to avoid negative behavior.

H6: Tendency to gossip is positively related to employee cynicism.

Narcissism, Abusive Supervision and Employee Cynicism

Gauglitz et al. (2023) found that narcissists are highly egoistic due which they are not receptive to negative feedback and criticism. On receiving negative feedbacks, they become deviant and abusive towards such persons. While validating the association between narcissism and abusive supervision, Breevaart and Schyns (2025) found that narcissists tend to project themselves by undermining others' job performance. De Bruin and Finkelstein (2023) argue that narcissists are high taskmasters and expect the same from others. When employees do not perform accordingly, narcissists adopt abusive and deviant behaviors. Moreover, employees avoid retaliating against the narcissist supervisors due to the fear of drastic consequences and, therefore, engage in cynical behavior. The above theoretical discussions suggest that narcissism directly correlates with abusive supervision and abusive supervision promotes employee cynicism. Therefore, we argue that.

H7: Abusive supervision mediates narcissism and employee cynicism.

Abusive Supervision, Gossip, and Employee Cynicism

Literature from psychological contract violation and workplace gossip suggests that abusive supervision is a significant predictor of job and non-job-related gossip (Grayson et al., 2025). Many organizations' protocols require abusees to report incidents of abusive behavior. However, studies suggest that employees are afraid of reporting such incidents (Zhong et al., 2025), and therefore, they engage in workplace gossips. (Arshad et al., 2025) suggest that many organizations' promotions and rewards depend on the supervisors' recommendations. Therefore, employees neither retaliate nor report such incidents and gossips to release their emotional stress.

Both task-related gossip and interpersonal gossip have a positive association with employee cynicism (Atamba et al., 2023). The workplace gossips promote distrust among employees triggering employees' cynicism. In turn, the employees stop trusting the management and their decisions. Moreover, studies have documented that the organizations strategically promote or curb gossip, leading to employees' cynicism (Khairy & Elzek, 2024; Kuo et al., 2018). The literature suggests that abusive supervision is a significant predictor of workplace gossips. The spread of rumors and gossips regarding the management and supervisors' triggers distrust and employee cynicism at the workplace. Therefore, we propose that.

H8: Tendency to gossip mediates abusive supervision and employee cynicism.

Narcissism, Abusive Supervision, and Surface Acting

Narcissistic leaders, driven by entitlement, low empathy, and a need for admiration, are significantly more likely to engage in abusive supervision (Gauglitz et al., 2023). This abuse creates a threatening and unpredictable environment for the employees (Arshad et al., 2025). To cope with the supervisor's hostility and protect themselves, employees engage in surface acting, suppressing their genuine negative emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment and faking positive expressions (Hu et al., 2025). They "put on a mask" to appease the narcissistic supervisor. However, this surface acting is emotionally draining and inauthentic, leading to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and withdrawal. Wang et al. (2024) suggest that the narcissistic supervisor often misinterprets this surface compliance as genuine respect or admiration, reinforcing their abusive behavior and perpetuating this cycle. Thus, supervisor's narcissism promotes abuse, which forces employees into surface acting as a survival strategy, ultimately harming subordinate's well-being (Liu et al., 2025). When the narcissistic supervisors are engaged in abusive supervision, their emotional, cognitive, and physical resources deplete due to their inability to create equilibrium between their job resources and job demands (Breevaart & Schyns, 2025). It results in aggression and the promotion of abusive supervision at the workplace. However, the subordinates avoid direct retaliation and involve in surface acting to protect themselves from the drastic workplace consequences (Yam et al., 2016). The literature suggests that a supervisor's narcissism directly correlates to abusive supervision, promoting surface acting. Therefore, we propose that

H10: Abusive supervision mediates narcissism and surface acting.

Methodology

Section A: Demographical Profile of Respondents Demographics

Section A of questionnaire was associated with the demographic profile of the respondents. The demographics information includes their gender, age, qualifications, experience, designation, sector, and nature of business. The summarized results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Information

Demographic Profile	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	169	42.25
Male	231	57.75
Age in Years		
25-34	133	33.25
35-45	141	35.25
46-54	82	20.5
55-65	44	11

Qualification		
14 Years	138	34.5
16 Years	214	53.5
18 Years	48	12
Designation		
Assistant Manager	256	64
Manager	144	36
Experience (Years)		
1—5	181	45.25
6—10	102	25.5
11—15	62	15.5
16—20	31	7.75
Above 20	24	6
Salary		
25,000-35,000	63	15.75
35,000-50,000	156	39
50,000-75,000	142	10.15
More than 75,000	39	9.75

Table 2 shows the summary of demographic profile. The male respondents were in majority ($n = 217$), representing 62% of the total sample, while females were ($n = 133$), representing 38%. The participants' age ranged between 26 and 65 years. The majority of the respondents' ages were 26 to 45 years, representing 73.4%, while 26.6% of the respondents were 46–65 years of age. The respondents were requested to give years of education, and the majority had 14 to 16 years, representing 92%, and a few employees had 18 years of schooling, representing only 8%. Respondents were asked to give their job position. The majority, 64.5%, was of assistant managers and the remaining 35.4% were managers. Respondents' years of experience ranged from 1 to 20+ years. A majority had 5 years of experience, representing 48.8%, which indicates that the majority of the respondents are at the beginning of their career. Moreover, 27.7% had 10 years of experience and only 14 had 20 years of experience. It was surprising to know that 10.6% were those employees who had more than 20 years of experience. The results also show that majority of employees were having 35,000 to 75,000 salary (73.7%).

Sampling Process

Data collection for this study targeted academic staff within the business faculties of five private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia, all offering business programs located in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Johor, and Penang. Data was collected via google forms. Anonymity was strictly maintained throughout the online process. Based on non-probability convenience sampling, the responses were collected from 415 faculty members of HEIs of Malaysia of which we received 400 valid questionnaires.

Measures and Scales

The study has seven constructs and thirty-four items, based on a 7-point Likert scale. The questionnaire of abusive supervision was adapted from Tepper (2000) with seven items. Employee cynicism was measured using seven item scale of Kuo (2010). Moreover, tendency to gossip was measured via Kurland and Pelled (2000) scale having 14 items. These 14 items are divided into two categories. 7 items are for measuring job related gossip and 7 for non-job-related gossip. Grandey (2003) scale of 7 items was used to measure the surface acting. Additionally, 6 item of

narcissism's scale of Hochwarter and Thompson (2012) was used to measure supervisor's narcissism, and Malach-Pines (2005) 10 items' scale for measuring burnout.

Results

Descriptive Analysis

The study has used descriptive analysis to measure the internal consistency and univariate normality of the constructs. The summarized results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis

	Mean	St.Dev.	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's Alpha
Abusive Supervision	5.144	1.219	-.686	.352	0.884
Burnout	4.989	1.178	-.580	.452	0.912
Employee Cynicism	4.998	1.232	-.514	-.061	0.851
Narcissism	5.648	0.59	.490	.352	0.884
Surface Acting	4.681	1.212	.631	.437	0.89
Tendency to Gossip	5.314	1.462	.528	.163	0.89

The results show that the highest and lowest value of Skewness values are for abusive supervision (Mean= 5.14, SD=1.21, SK= -.686), and narcissism (Mean= 5.64, SD=0.59, SK= 0.49) respectively. Similarly, the highest and the lowest value of kurtosis is for burnout (Mean= 4.98, SD= 1.17, KR= 0.45), and employee cynicism (Mean= 4.99, SD=1.23, KR=-0.061) respectively. The results depict univariate normality. Furthermore, the values of Cronbach's alpha for all the constructs are greater than 0.70, thus showing internal consistency.

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity was assessed using the composite reliability and average variance extracted values. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Convergent Validity

	Composite Reliability	AVE	Mean	St.Dev.
Abusive Supervision	0.909	0.645	5.144	1.219
Burnout	0.93	0.504	4.989	1.178
Employee Cynicism	0.892	0.669	4.998	1.232
Narcissism	0.912	0.534	5.648	0.59
Surface Acting	0.924	0.537	4.681	1.212
Tendency to Gossip	0.916	0.533	5.314	1.462

The findings fulfill the requirement of convergent validity as values of composite reliability (CR>0.7) and Average variance extracted (AVE>0.5) meet the Hair et al. (2012) criteria.

Discriminant Validity

Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criteria for examining the discriminant validity has been used. The table below shows the summary of discriminant validity findings.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity

	AS	B	EC	Nar	SA	TG
Abusive Supervision	0.803					
Burnout	0.417	0.71				
Employee Cynicism	0.588	0.63	0.818			
Narcissism	0.555	0.272	0.454	0.731		
Surface Acting	0.536	0.47	0.654	0.517	0.733	
Tendency to Gossip	0.522	0.336	0.601	0.529	0.714	0.73

Results of Hypotheses

The study has examined six direct hypotheses and three indirect hypotheses. The measurement and structural models are shown in Figures 2 and 3, and the summarized results in Table 4.

Table 4: Path coefficients of Direct Effects

Direct Relationships	Beta	T Stat.	P-Values	Results
Abusive Supervision -> Burnout	0.591	16.192	0	Accepted
Abusive Supervision -> Emp. cynicism	0.024	0.658	0.255	Rejected
Abusive Supervision -> Surface Acting	0.741	31.971	0	Accepted
Abusive Supervision -> Tend. to Gossip	0.835	50.194	0	Accepted
Narcissism -> Abusive Supervision	0.869	86.45	0	Accepted
Tendency to Gossip -> Emp. cynicism	0.899	28.983	0	Accepted
Indirect Relationships				
Narcissism -> Abusive Super. -> Emp. cynicism	0.021	0.656	0.256	Rejected
Abusive Super. -> Tend. to Gossip -> Emp. cynicism	0.751	23.01	0	Accepted
Narcissism -> Abusive Supervision -> Surface Acting	0.645	26.396	0	Accepted

The results presented above conclude that abusive supervision is positively associated with burnout, surface acting and tendency to gossip. However, the findings of this study reveal that abusive supervision doesn't promote employee cynicism. Moreover, it is also found that supervisor's narcissistic behavior promote abusive supervision. The results propose that tendency to gossip trigger employees cynic behaviors at workplace. The study also tested three indirect hypotheses and based on the findings, it can be inferred that abusive supervision doesn't mediate narcissism and employee cynicism relationship while abusive supervision mediates narcissism and surface acting relationship and tendency to gossip mediates abusive supervision and employee cynicism relationship.

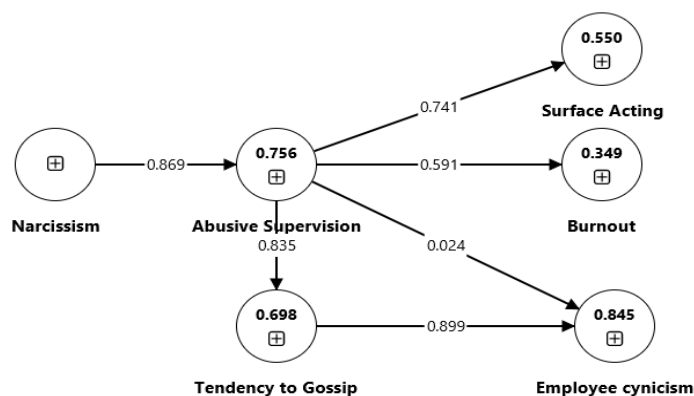


Figure 2: Measurement Model

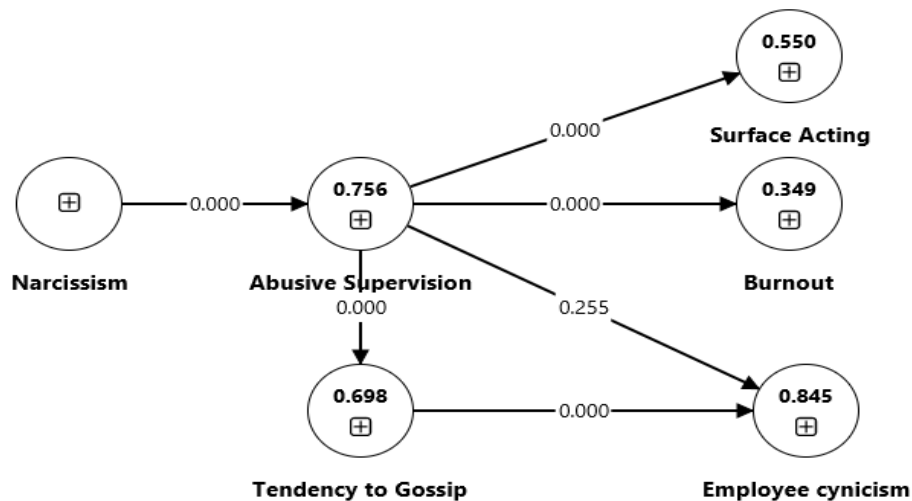


Figure 3: Structured Model

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

Hypothesis one explored the "positive effect of abusive supervision on burnout," which our results and earlier studies support. Studies have claimed that the adverse consequences of abusive supervision are depression, anxiety, and burnout (Arshad et al., 2025). The adverse consequences of abusive supervision are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of confidence. Prior studies found that employees either retaliate to abusive behavior of their supervisors or engage in surface acting (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). Many past studies have found a positive association between abusive supervision and burnout (Arshad et al., 2025). Past literature suggest that the inability to release stress directly fuels the employee burnout (Liu et al., 2025). Within Malaysian HEIs, where hierarchical norms often discourage open confrontation, surface acting becomes a prevalent coping strategy, perpetuating supervisor's abusive behaviors while promoting faculty's burnout.

Hypothesis two proposed that abusive supervision promotes employee cynicism among the HEIs of Malaysia. The results of the study don't support this hypothesis and earlier studies. Faculty in Malaysian HEIs often retain high autonomy over research, teaching, and consulting activities. This autonomy reduces abusive supervision's impact and confines it to administrative interactions rather than core professional identity.

Hypothesis three was on abusive supervision and surface acting, for which we found support in the results and earlier literature. Abusive supervision promotes emotional stress. However, many employees use surface acting as a coping strategy (Hu et al., 2025). However, in the long run, it enhances employees' emotional stress and exhaustion. Although employees in service and non-service sectors use surface acting, the literature suggests that employees commonly use it in sectors where employees are not allowed to show dissent to the superiors (Kim et al., 2025).

Hypothesis four was on the positive effect of abusive supervision on the tendency to gossip. The literature and our results support this hypothesis. Abusive supervision promotes job-related and non-job-related gossips that adversely affect employees' performance and behavior towards the

organization (Grayson et al., 2025). Many organizations have developed policies and protocols for reporting abusive incidents (Khairy & Elzek, 2024). However, the literature suggests that the employees do not report most abusive behaviors, as they are afraid of adverse consequences and therefore, they engage in negative gossip at workplace to promote cynicism (Zhong et al., 2025).

Hypothesis five was on the positive effect of supervisor's narcissism on abusive supervision. The results and earlier studies validate this hypothesis. It has been documented in many studies that narcissism is a significant predictor of abusive supervision. In a study on abusive supervision, Gauglitz et al. (2023) concluded that narcissists are highly egoistic and have high self-esteem, due to which they have high expectations from the employees. De Bruin and Finkelstein (2023) suggest that narcissistic supervisors become abusive towards their subordinates when employees perform below their expectations.

Hypotheses six state that "tendency to gossip positively affects employee cynicism". The hypothesis was accepted and the results of this study are consistent with earlier studies. Grayson et al. (2025) reports that as employees engage in workplace gossip, they distrust the management and their decisions, promoting employee cynicism within the organization. Gossips are common in the HEIs of Malaysia as the subordinates fail to retaliate to their supervisors' behaviors directly. This, eventually, increases employees' cynicism.

Hypothesis seven was on the mediating effect of abusive supervision on narcissism and employee cynicism. The hypothesis was rejected as the results suggest that abusive supervision doesn't promote employee cynicism among the faculty members of HEIs in Malaysia. Liu et al. (2025) suggest that narcissists do not like negative feedback from others. On receiving the same, they adopt deviant and abusive behavior towards the employees but the abusive behavior may not promote cynical behaviors at workplace in HEIs of Malaysia. Omar Ahmed and Zhang (2025) suggest that organizations that make efforts to provide emotional, psychological, and material support to the employees may reduce cynicism.

Hypothesis eight was on the mediating effect of gossip on abusive supervision and employee cynicism. The results and earlier studies are consistent with this hypothesis. (Zhong et al., 2025) found that abusive supervision promotes organizational gossips. Organizational gossips can be positive or negative. The effect of the former is greater than the latter. Bhattacharjee and Sarkar (2024) found that job-related gossip promotes employee cynicism, and non-job-related gossip also positively affects employee cynicism, But this effect is stronger for job-related gossip than non-job-related gossip. The study also suggested that HR can manage social and job-related gossip to reduce employees' cynic behavior. Past studies suggest that abusive supervision directly affects gossip, and the tendency to gossip is positively associated with employee cynicism (Atamba et al., 2023; Grayson et al., 2025).

Hypothesis nine was on the mediating effect of abusive supervision on narcissism and surface acting. The results and literature are consistent with this hypothesis. Supervisors and employees have tendencies to conserve, protect, and retain their valuable resources (Bhattacharjee & Sarkar, 2024). When the supervisors are highly narcissistic, they tend to bully employees. Moreover, narcissistic supervisors promote counterproductive behaviors among the employees due to their egoistic nature (Gauglitz et al., 2023). Due to the fear of consequences, employees avoid direct retaliation and confrontation of the narcissistic supervisors; they are more likely to engage in surface acting. Rather than responding to the narcissistic supervisors in the same way, the subordinates hide their actual emotions and display fake expressions (Hu et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study has extended conservation of resources theory for developing the conceptual framework. We have proposed six direct relationships and three indirect relationships. The findings illustrate that seven hypotheses were accepted and two were rejected, and the findings were consistent with past studies. The results show that abusive supervision positively affects burnout, surface acting, and the tendency to gossip while it doesn't promote employee cynicism. At the same time, narcissism has a positive association with abusive supervision. Moreover, the study finds that abusive supervision doesn't mediate narcissism and employee cynicism. Gossip mediates abusive supervision and employee cynicism. And abusive supervision mediates narcissism and surface acting.

The results suggest that abusive supervision has adverse consequences and supervisor's narcissism trigger abusive workplace supervision at HEIs of Malaysia. Therefore, HEIs need to monitor and curb incidents of supervision. Although many HEIs have strict rules and regulations about abusive supervision, most of the faculty members do not report since they are afraid of their adverse consequences. Therefore, we suggest that organizations should address those issues that promote abusive supervision. The literature suggests that physically active persons are less abusive as they relieve their stress through physical activities. As narcissistic people are highly energetic, HEIs should have gym facilities and encourage their employees to use it regularly to reduce emotional and job-related stress. Moreover, organizations may also arrange regular mentoring sessions to curb the abusive behaviors of the supervisors.

Theoretical Implications

This study significantly advances the theoretical understanding of abusive supervision by extending Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and Social Exchange Theory within the HEIs of Malaysia. First, it validates COR's applicability in the HEIs of Malaysia by demonstrating that narcissistic supervisors deplete faculty's emotional, cognitive, and physical resources through abusive behaviors, leading to adverse outcomes like burnout and surface acting. Second, the study identifies gossip as a coping mechanism when formal grievance channels are ineffective, enriching the COR theory. Finally, the validated mediation models provide pathways for future theory-building, particularly in high-power-distance cultures where direct retaliation is suppressed. This study has assessed the constructs of tendency to gossip and employee cynicism as consequences to abusive supervision as core indicators of strain and maladaptive coping within the context of faculty of HEIs of Malaysia. A core theoretical contribution lies in contradicting the widely accepted causal association concerning abusive supervision and employee cynicism. Prior research, predominantly conducted in West, consistently positions abusive supervision as an antecedent to employee cynicism. The finding suggests a non-significant path from abusive supervision to employee cynicism. It suggests that in the specific context of Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), abusive supervision does not cause employee cynicism. This demands a fundamental reassessment of the "negative spiral" models (e.g., stemming from Social Exchange Theory or displaced aggression concepts), highlighting that the direction and existence of this association may be dependent on factors previously overlooked.

Managerial Implications

For Malaysian HEIs, this study offers interventions and implications for the management to assist in mitigate the precursors of abusive supervision and its damaging effects. The results indicate that narcissistic tendencies promote abusive supervision in HEIs of Malaysia therefore, the HEIs should offer leadership development programs that may target narcissistic tendencies of the

leadership through trainings in emotional regulation and collaborative decision-making. To reduce fear of retaliation from the supervisors in case of reporting the cases of abusive supervision, the HEIs of Malaysia should establish protected reporting channels to avoid power-distance barriers and bureaucratic shielding of abusive leaders. Furthermore, HEIs must monitor and manage faculty workload to prevent chronic overload, a key burnout antecedent, and grant autonomy over schedules where possible, as buffers against resource depletion. The workload reforms may help in reducing administrative burdens, set realistic performance metrics, and provide research support. This can prevent resource depletion that triggers supervisory abuse. HR policies should monitor work environment for tendency to gossip as this is an early warning indicator of cynicism. The HEIs in Malaysia should focus on development of strong support system for the faculty members to reduce depletion of emotional, cognitive, and physical resources via abusive supervision. This involves enhancing access to mental health counseling to address workplace stress. The finding that gossip acts as a coping mechanism highlights the failure of formal grievance channels. HEIs should overhaul these procedures to ensure they are independent, confidential, accessible, and offer protection against retaliation. The HEIs must develop a mechanism for timely and transparent investigations for verified abuse as it is essential to rebuild institutional trust. Finally, HEIs in Malaysia should proactively employ anonymous climate surveys and create safe, facilitated forums where concerns can be raised constructively before escalating into destructive gossip so that the leadership may visibly act on the feedback received.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was restricted to the HEIs of Malaysia. Future studies may be extended to other underdeveloped countries with different cultural. Besides HEIs, abusive supervision is also found in the service industry and large-scale manufacturing industry. Future researchers may extend their scope to other domains as well. Comparative study between service and non-service industry may bring further insight into it. Demographic factors have different associations with abusive supervision, which future researchers may explore. This study was restricted to seven variables. Other studies may study the effect of organizational citizenship behavior, leader-member exchange, core self-evaluations, and organizational disengagement on abusive supervision. We, in the study, have examined the mediating roles of abusive supervision and the tendency to gossip. Future studies may incorporate other mediators such as emotional labor, ethical leadership, job dissatisfaction, knowledge sharing, and organizational deviance.

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